

THE
CHESTER
GIRLS



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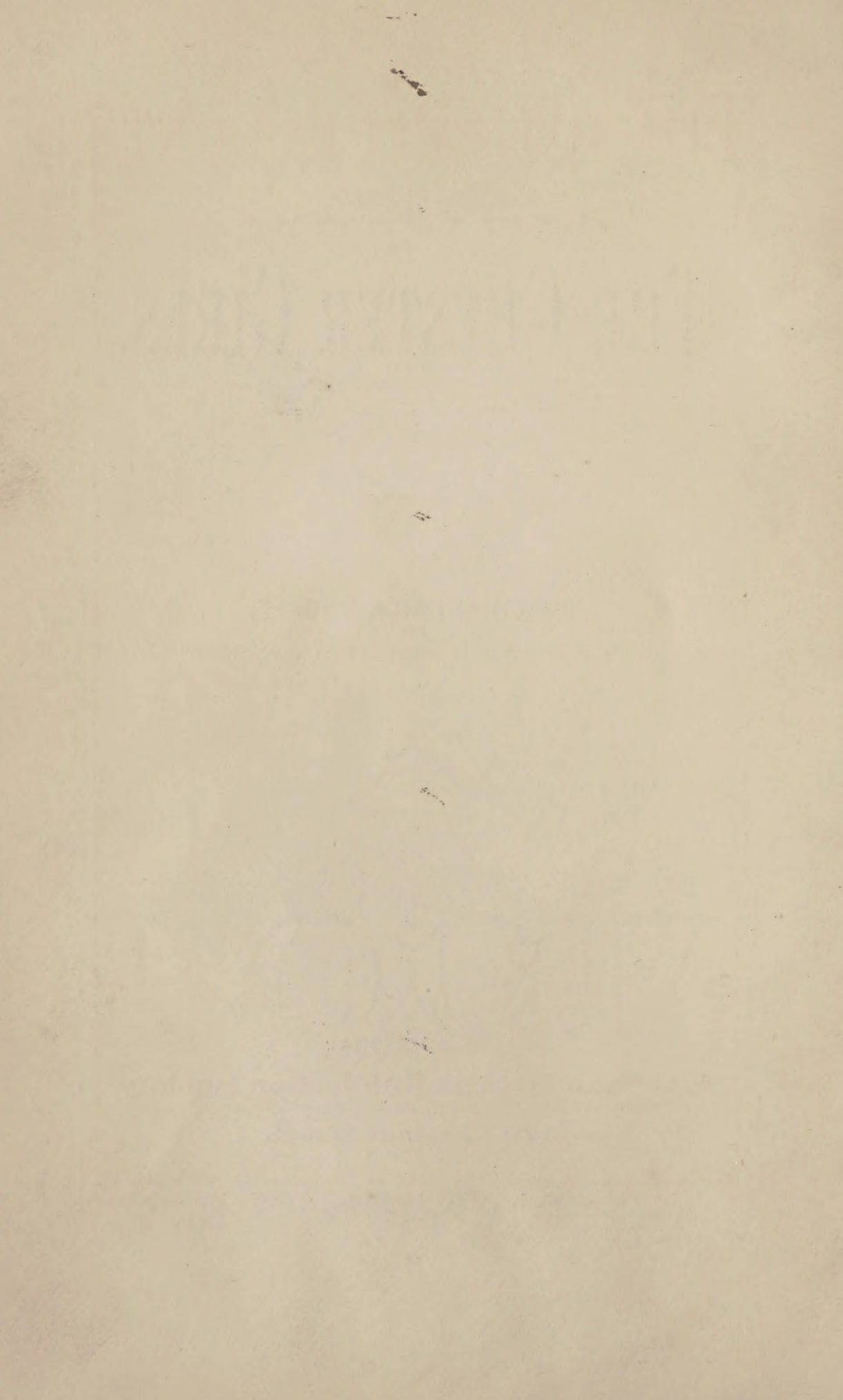
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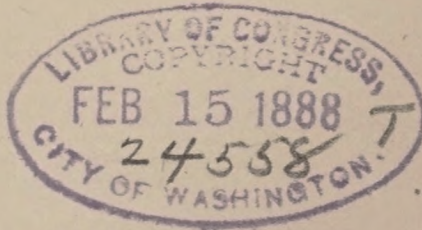




THE CHESTER GIRLS.

BY
ROSE HARTWICK THORPE,
AUTHOR OF
"CURFEW MUST NOT RING TO-NIGHT."

35-
Be not amazed at life. 'Tis still
The mode of God with his elect,
Their hopes exactly to fulfill
In times and ways they least expect.
DEAN ALFORD.



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THE CHESTER GIRLS.

CHAPTER I.

LITTLE BLOSSOM'S DOLL.

A MAN skulked along, in the deepening twilight shadows. He was coarsely, even shabbily, dressed. His coat was shiny at the seams, and frayed at the edges. His hat was much the worse for wear, and his whole appearance betokened one whom shame and fear enthralled. Somewhere, somehow, he had lost the strength and vigor which characterize a man in the full possession of self-conscious manhood.

He seeks the deepest shadow—avoiding the lamp-light's glare. He darts across an open space, where no friendly shadow reaches out its dusky hand to conceal him.

A sudden flood of dazzling light streams out from the windows of a room, across the way. He starts and shudders and trembles, as though powerless to resist some awful, impelling influence.

He thrusts a bundle he is carrying behind him with

a quick spasmodic motion, as if that dazzling light were a keen, penetrating eye, to pierce through the wrappings of the package he bears, and to view its secret contents.

His whole aim seems, now, to be—to get safely beyond the building where the light has startled him.

Other buildings stand along the entire length of the street; but he has no fear of them. *They* will not detain him, or snatch from him the treasure he now conceals in the breast of his coat. If he can escape from the vicinity of that *one* building, he is safe. But will he—can he do it?

The Evil One has gained possession of the man's will through his most powerful agent, and he smiles at his poor victim's frantic efforts to break the chains which bind him captive. He laughs in derision; for he knows what the end will be.

There is a wonderful fascination for that wretched, trembling man, in the building from which he is endeavoring to escape. Such a powerful influence it seems to exert over his struggling senses, that, irresistibly; unconsciously, he is drawn toward it, even while his heart and will are battling to keep him from it.

There is just one thing in all the world that can exert such an influence as this over man's better judgment; that can drown his sense of right, and compel him to trample on all the holiest and highest attributes of his nature; that can deaden his ears to the cry of his starv-

ing children ; that can blind his eyes to the woe depicted on their faces ; that can make him forget honor and truth, and become devoid of all sense of shame ; that can dull his every sense, until degradation and filth no longer seem to him among the despicable things of life.

There is no need for me to write the word. There is only one thing which can do all this, and the smallest school-boy in our land knows what it is.

Suddenly the man stood still. A footstep sounded near him, and a voice accosted him :

“ Joe Randall, you ? What, going to leave so early as this ? Why, man, what’s the matter ? ”

“ I—I—haven’t been there at all,” faltered Joe, meekly. “ I—I think I’ll not stop to-night.”

“ Pshaw, man ! come back. Barr has just received a new supply of prime stuff, and I’m going in to sample it. If Barr won’t treat, I will. So come on.”

Still Joe Randall hesitated ; and the hand which held the bundle concealed beneath his coat, clutched at it frantically, and held it in a vice-like grasp.

“ It’s—little Blossom’s birthday, and—and I told her I would come straight home to-night ”—replied Joe, tremulously.

“ Oh, yes ! of course, I understand. These little ones must be humored on their birthdays,” said his friend, laughing. “ You needn’t stay five minutes, you know.

Just to try this new brand of—what's-it's-name? Well, it don't matter. You'll get home, then, in time for the party—eh?"

"I'm all the party she expects, and——" with a firm, mighty effort—"I can't disappoint her. No, Davis, I can't stop to-night. I promised my wife I wouldn't stop."

"So did I, just for the sake of keeping peace in the family," rejoined Davis, with a brutal laugh. "But I would go to Barr's to-night for the sake of asserting my independence, if for no other reason. I didn't yield my manhood into a woman's keeping so readily. It would be the same as granting that I am no longer capable of caring for myself; besides, what harm can an occasional social glass do any man? Come on, just to prove your manhood, if for no other reason. Don't act the fool. Come on."

And the poor, hesitating wretch, just to prove his manhood, proved the entire loss of it, and accompanied his tempter into the saloon, satisfying his conscience with the promise that he would get rid of Davis in this way. He would only take one drink; and Barr should not get the doll he was taking home to Blossom, as he had the new shoes he had been taking to his little daughter more than a week before.

And, ah, those shoes! How badly little Blossom had needed them. She did not need them now; for she had

gone out in her bare feet, one frosty morning, because she had no shoes to wear; and since then she had been in bed with a fever flush on her cheeks, and its fire in her eyes.

Joe Randall hated Barr, when he remembered that *his* little daughter was wearing Blossom's shoes—the shoes that would have prevented her sickness if they had not “gone for drink.”

This was her birthday; and because his conscience had pricked him so often and so sharply, on account of the shoes, he promised her that he would come home early that night, and that he would bring her a doll.

Wonderful possibility of happy child-life! It would not matter to little, waiting Blossom, that the doll cost scarcely more than the price of three drinks at the bar. It had yellow china hair and blue china eyes; and Joe Randall had unwrapped it a dozen times in the little while it had been in his possession, and had pictured to himself the child's rapturous delight when he should lay it in her arms, and should tell her that “papa loved his little daughter.” The anticipated pleasure of his “home coming” that night, was more enjoyment than all the evenings he had ever spent at Barr's. But he realized his own weakness, and he knew that on other evenings he had left his work with as strong a determination to go directly home, and had stopped at Barr's instead.

Could he get past the place to-night, or would the tempter be stronger than he? Once safely past the saloon, which he must pass in order to reach his home, and Blossom would be sure of her doll, for one evening at least. It was just possible that it would some time find its way to Barr's little girl—how Randall hated that child as she played with the toys purchased for Blossom—but Blossom would have had her birthday doll; and on that day, at least, she would not be disappointed.

“I'll go in for a moment only,” said Mr. Randall, in reply to Mr. Davis' last argument. “For a moment only, remember,” he added, more confidently. His conscience was so easily appeased,

The Evil One laughed, and chuckled, and rubbed his hands in glee. Oh, certainly, one moment will be sufficient! One drop of liquid fire will be enough to kindle an unquenchable fire which will burn for all eternity.

At the door of the saloon they met Barr, genial and jolly, smiling, and rubbing his hands—a most successful agent to do the bidding of his master. He shook hands with his guests most cordially, and inquired affectionately after their health. He was too wise to ask about wives and little ones at home. He had all he could attend to in making his customers forget home and its responsibilities.

But Joe Randall met some one else at the door of the saloon.

Little Blossom, tossing restlessly and feverishly on her sick couch all that long afternoon, had thought of little else than her birthday doll.

"When I shut my eyes I can see it, mamma," she said. "And I feel it in my arms—a real, real dollie, like Jennie Barr has. I shall love your apron too, mamma, when it is rolled into a doll; but I shall love the new one so much, because it will have a face like mine, and hands, and pretty blue shoes on its dear little feet."

"Dyke," she added, turning to a boy who had entered the room, and whose roguish eyes indicated that he was very much like other boys, in spite of his unhappy environment — "Dyke, isn't it almost time for papa to come?"

"Not for an hour yet," he replied, carelessly.

A long-drawn sigh came from the little sick sister.

"I never saw such a long day in my life," she said, wearily. "I guess it is because I'm six years old. Do the days grow long when one gets old, mamma?"

"No, dear, they seem shorter."

"But I'm old now. Six years," she said, fretfully. "And it is such a long day."

"We might talk about the doll, and that would make the time seem shorter," suggested Dyke, gently. For although he was a boy—a rough, teasing boy at times—he loved his little sister very much. She was such a frail

little creature; and this last sickness of hers made him very tender of her.

"So we might," she cried, joyously. "It will be beautiful, like the angels. Mamma, what are angels?"

But mamma pretended not to hear.

"They are just nothing at all," said Dyke. "There are no such things as ghosts and angels."

"Mamie Clark, says there are angels and a heaven where everybody is happy, and where every one goes after they die, if they love God."

"Hush, Blossom!" whispered Dyke. "Mamma don't like to hear you talk about dying; and anyhow it is only a fairy story. There isn't any God either."

"I did hope there was," sighed Blossom, "and I do truly believe there is. It would be so nice to go there, because—because—" drawing his head down close to her lips—"they don't have 'the drinks' there."

"Now, Dyke," she said, a little later: "I do really and truly think it is time papa came. See, mamma has the table all set, and she has looked out of the window three times. I saw her do it. Dyke, won't you, please?—"

"What, Blossom?"

"Won't you please run down to Barr's and wait for papa, and please"—pathetically—"please don't let him stop there."

The wistful entreaty on his little sister's face was too much for Dyke's resistance; and kissing her, he snatched his hat from the wooden peg behind the door, and ran out into the street.

It was Dyke's face that confronted Mr. Randall, as he was about to enter the saloon.

"Please, papa," he entreated, "little Blossom sent me to meet you. She is so afraid you won't come right away."

"You must be in a desperate condition, to need an escort past my door," said Barr, sarcastically.

It was enough. The boy's beseeching face was as nothing, compared with that covert sneer. He would show Barr and Davis that he could do as he pleased.

"I'll come when I am ready," he said, angrily, and walked boldly into the saloon.

He did not mean it at all, and his heart reproved him for the harsh words; but he could not bear the taunts of his companions, and so another downward step was taken.

The story is such an old one there is nothing new about it. It has been told over, and over, and over, until the world says, "It is threadbare. Why flaunt this bar-room misery in our faces?" And yet the death-dealing work goes on, and we, who hold the pen, are responsible if we do not cry out against the power which is wrecking our homes and our happiness.

It was ten o'clock before Joe Randall sought his home. The first drink had called for others; and when, at last, he turned his uncertain footsteps homeward, there was no one to urge him to remain, for he had spent his last dime; and Blossom's doll had also been sacrificed to satisfy the crazy thirst which that first drink had awakened.

Not until he had reached the door of his home did he remember Blossom's request; and then the thought that she would be asleep comforted him. He was too much under the influence of liquor to care greatly, and so he entered the room.

The sight which met his gaze partially sobered him; for even in his stupid condition, he realized that something unusual had occurred, to bring the doctor there at ten o'clock.

The doctor stood by the bed holding Blossom's hand; and a grave look was on his kindly face.

Dyke was smothering his passionate sobs in the bed-clothes, and Mrs. Randall stood near with a look of frozen misery on her face. There were no tears in her eyes—only utter despair; that despair which those feel who see their loved ones go from them into "the beyond," and who have no faith, or trust in God, to comfort them.

Standing in the doorway, and leaning against the casing for support, Joe Randall saw, and understood it all. He

knew that the strange, dream-like look on Blossom's face meant—death.

“He's so long—so long—coming home to-night,” moaned the dying child. “I'm six years old to-day, and it's such a long, long day.”

Then lifting her eyes to the good doctor's face, she asked :

“Is there a beautiful heaven somewhere, and are little girls happy there?”

“Yes, dear,” he replied.

“I'm so glad. But why don't my papa come?”

Then catching sight of him, her voice rang out with all its feeble, failing strength :

“Give it to me, papa—my dear, new dolly.”

With a cry of anguish he staggered forward and knelt by the bed.

“Oh, doctor!” he cried. “Is she very sick?”

“Yes.”

“Will she die?”

Silence, which was far more suggestive than words.

“Give me my dolly, papa.”

A sob was her only reply.

“Haven't you got it?”

He shook his head—he could not speak.

“Is it——” she hesitated—“did you leave it at Barr's?”

Another sob from the kneeling man.

"Oh, I didn't think you loved Barr's little girl more'n your own," she wailed. "You gave her my new shoes; but I never thought you'd give her my dolly too. Oh, I do want it so bad—so bad."

"And you shall have it," he cried, desperately.

"It's too late, now," said his wife, in a hard voice. "You have killed little Blossom."

But he did not seem to hear her. The liquor he had taken fired his brain, and his dying child's reproaches crazed him. He scarcely realized what he was doing—he was conscious of only one thought—to get the doll for Blossom.

Barr was closing the saloon for the night, when a man flung the door open, and confronted him with a wild, haggard face.

"I want the doll I gave you to-night," he demanded.

"You do, eh?" laughed the saloon keeper. "Get out of here, lively, or I'll pitch you out."

And this was the man who had greeted him so cordially in the early evening.

"I *will* have it," cried Randall, with a movement toward the place where the doll lay.

"I've no time to bother with drunken fools. Get out," exclaimed Barr, taking him by the arm, and forcing him toward the door.

"Nor I with drunken fool-makers," hissed the crazed

man, snatching up the poker and dealing Barr a heavy blow.

How still the room was after that! There was no one to hinder him from taking the doll now, if he chose. How white and ghastly Barr's face looked in the light of the lamp! Had he killed him? He bent over his victim. Yes, he was sure that he was dead. He had only wanted the doll, and he had killed a man. The thought sobered him completely, and filled his heart with a wild, vague terror.

But come what would, Blossom *should* have her doll. He took it from the place where it lay and went out, closing the door behind him.

Back to his home he hurried. His footsteps did not falter now. He was sober, and he realized all that had come to him in the last few hours. If Blossom could only live to know that he had brought her the doll—but even this poor boon was denied him.

On opening the door he entered the room of death.

Dyke still wept by the bedside, his wife still sat with that stony, unreconciled look on her face. The doctor was gone, and kindly hands were doing the last services for the little one who was past all pain.

He went up to the bedside. The ladies who were present withdrew, and left him alone with his living and his dead.

"Little Blossom," he said, tenderly, "I am going away from every one until I can be a better man. Good-bye."

He stooped and kissed her still face, and laid the doll on her breast. Then, without a word to wife or son, he turned and went out of the room.

The next day, Barr opened his saloon as usual; but the village folk noticed that he had his head bandaged, and that his face was swollen and discolored.

He passed the matter off as best he could; but did not give the true reason. He never mentioned the missing doll, nor did Mrs. Randall know where her husband had got the doll which lay in Blossom's arms when they laid her away beneath the falling autumn leaves.

Dyke did not know; but with his ready boy wit he surmised much, because he knew that his father had exchanged a package, about the size and shape of a doll, for drink at Barr's, and when Barr appeared the next day with a swollen head, he guessed the rest.

As for Mr. Randall, he had disappeared as suddenly and mysteriously as if the earth had swallowed him up, with only that broken, penitent sentence spoken over his dead child for a clue to his strange disappearance.

A few days of conjecture among the village people, and then they seemed to forget him; and life at the Bend moved along in its old accustomed channel.

Mrs. Randall had once been a loving wife. She had

been a tender mother before Blossom's death ; but she was silent and grave now. Her grief seemed to have frozen all tenderness out of her nature.

Dyke, with his genial, fun-loving nature, missed something from his home, which his mother should have supplied. He did not know that her lack of trust in God's wisdom and mercy was what he missed ; that the affliction which draws God's children closer to him, and makes them more tender and considerate, has the opposite effect on those who know not God's love.

One day, Mrs. Randall informed Dyke that she had received a letter from her brother in San Antonio, Texas, offering to herself and her son a home with him.

"I know very little about him," she said. "He is only my half-brother, and is many years my senior. He was a man when I was but a little child. I have seen him but once since. He has heard of my lonely condition, and offers us a home. He writes kindly, and we will accept his offer. He will probably assist in your education."

And so it was settled that they were to go to this strange uncle, whom Dyke had never heard mentioned before ; and he, at least, was glad of the change which would take them away from the scene of their sorrow.

CHAPTER II.

DYKE INTRODUCES HIMSELF.

THE letter which Dyke Randall had carefully deposited in the mail-box at the Bend, informing Colonel Chester that his mother had accepted his kind offer of a home, and would reach San Antonio on the 16th of November, lay unopened on Colonel Chester's desk, in his reading-room. He was absent from home; and as none of the family thought the letter of much importance, it lay there, where Aunt Dinah had placed it on the morning of its arrival, awaiting his return.

Dyke, with all of a boy's enthusiasm, had made certain that it was dropped into the box in safety, and then he began, in imagination, to follow its course to its destination.

"Uncle received the letter two days ago," he remarked, assuredly. "And there's no doubt whatever but that he'll meet us at the depot with his carriage."

Mrs. Randall was not so confident of a warm reception. She remembered how displeased Colonel Chester had been when, as a girl, she had chosen Joe Randall—then Mr. Joseph Randall, of the Bend—in preference to a

home under his roof. She also remembered the long years of estrangement and silence which had followed, in which they had been as the veriest strangers.

In what capacity she was about to enter his home, she knew not ; but it mattered little to her. It would be a shelter for her lacerated heart to hide in—a place in which to nurse her wrongs and count them up against the hand which had smitten her.

But she did not interrupt Dyke's bright anticipations. She simply kept silence.

"Now, mamma," he said, loading himself down with parcels and boxes, as the train stopped at the depot, "remember that you've got as much of the Chester blood as Uncle Andrew has ; and you're not to let him lord it over you, if he is rich. I can take care of you, if he does not choose to, and he must not snub you."

She smiled, and shadowy as the smile was, it made his mother positively beautiful in the boy's eyes.

But a disappointment awaited them at the outset. There was no fine carriage at the depot ; no colored coachman with deferential bow ; no pleased Uncle Andrew to welcome them cordially to his home. They were strangers in a strange city, and knew not where to go.

"We won't go to his home until he comes for us—at least, *you* shall not," remarked Dyke, indignantly. "But it is different with me. I am only a boy, and you

shall stop at a hotel, while I go and inform him of our arrival."

There was a strong sense of wrong swelling in the boy's heart; and he decided that they would not go to Colonel Chester's like beggars. They had not asked for a home with him, and it was very doubtful, under the present circumstances, if they accepted his invitation at all. Dyke had an exalted idea of his own importance and budding manhood; and he carried his head very high as he went in search of Colonel Chester's residence, after leaving his mother at the hotel.

By inquiring, he had no difficulty in finding the place; for Colonel Chester was a prominent man, and well known.

On reaching the house, Dyke was a trifle awed. It was so much finer than he had anticipated. However, he had no intention of permitting Uncle Andrew to see that his splendor affected him.

"There is nothing like first impressions," soliloquized this wise lad, at the same time walking most leisurely, almost hesitatingly, through the grounds leading to the house. Thus he meant to convey an impression of utter indifference to his surroundings, in case any one might be watching him from some one of the many open windows, which he had no doubt was the case. But his hesitation was in reality caused, partly by a sense of timidity, and

partly by a wish to gain time for a more perfect self-possession.

A little dark figure came out of the house, and regarded him mischievously; poised itself on one foot, then, like a flash, turned a handspring, and "brought up" directly on the path before him.

"Yo' bettah get out ob heah libly, 'fore ole Nick get he eye on yo'," she said, warningly. "Ole Nick chaw yo' up like yo' was a hunk ob meat."

Dyke had no idea who old Nick was. Drawing himself up to his full height, and expecting to annihilate this queer specimen of humanity with his importance, he said:

"I am Dyke Randall. Inform your master of my presence."

"I'se mighty sorry dat Massa Chestah aint ter home to make a 'ception fo' yo', an' 'vite de big bugs to make yo' 'quaintance. I is, fo' sure. But I'spec's de young ladies 'll detain yo' han'som'ly till he comes. I'll reform 'em ob yo' presence."

And before Dyke could utter one word of remonstrance, the small elf had darted away, like a dusky shadow across the lawn.

"If there's one thing I detest more than another, it is a young lady," mused Dyke, dejectedly. "And here are several of them. I never could live here. I'll get

mother nicely settled, and then I'll go away, and seek my fortune. Those young ladies have settled matters for me at Uncle Andrew's.

"Didn't that black midget turn a quick handspring though?" he added, admiringly. "I couldn't do so well myself. I believe I'll try."

Flinging his hat on the ground, he tried his skill against that displayed by little black Gipsy; but the effort disgusted him.

"At any rate," he said, confidently, "I can't be beat at a genuine somersault. This grass is just the place for it. So here goes——"

He started on a brisk run down a slightly-inclined space, then began a series of revolutions in the air. Over and over he went, until, in his rapid exercise, he caught a glimpse of three faces, and was conscious of the very undignified position he had assumed.

The faces, with startled expressions, confronted him, when, abashed and shame-faced, he had gathered himself up from the grass at their feet, and made feeble and ineffectual efforts at removing the dust from his coat, and the bits of dry grass from his disheveled hair.

An elderly gentleman, with a stern countenance, surveyed Dyke severely, thinking him one of the venturesome city lads who had taken an unwarrantable liberty with his lawn.

"Well, sir," he exclaimed, in his deepest bass tones, which were enough to strike terror to the heart of any culprit.

But Dyke could have faced the gentleman's displeasure with less trepidation than the laughter in those girlish faces at his side.

"If you please, sir, I am Dyke Randall," he said, meekly, while hot flushes suffused his face. He had forgotten the grand manner which he had intended to assume on this occasion.

"I am Dyke Randall," he said; "and I wish to see my uncle, Andrew Chester."

A glow of friendly interest swept over one of the girl's faces before him, while an expression of contempt crept into the other.

"Oh! ah! so you are," replied Colonel Chester, while a suspicion of laughter came into the eyes a moment since so grave.

"My sister's son, eh? and you have presented yourself to me. Quite a novel method of introduction, and very original, I am sure. If our acquaintance is to be carried out as it has begun, I shall despair of my lawn."

"I beg pardon, sir, I——" faltered Dyke, confusedly.

"Oh! I understand! I was a boy once myself, something less than a hundred years ago; and I have not quite forgotten how 'the boy in me' would take possession

of my head and heels at times. No great harm done, my boy. Where is your mother?"

He looked past Dyke as he spoke, expecting, no doubt, to see that lady.

"She stopped at the hotel, while I came to inform you of our arrival."

"Which you have done most effectively," said Colonel Chester, laughing. "I would have sent the carriage to meet you at the train, had I been aware of your intention to come to-day."

"We wrote to you, sir," said Dyke, with a faint show of the dignity he had hoped to display at this time.

"There are several letters awaiting you at the house, grandpapa," spoke up one of the girls.

"I am sorry that I was absent when your mother reached San Antonio. However, I will send for her at once. Dyke—I think you say your name is Dyke?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, Dyke, these are my granddaughters, Florence and Nina Chester."

Florence favored Dyke with a most uncourteous glance; but Nina extended her hand cordially.

"I am ever so glad that you are coming to live with us, Dyke," she said, warmly. "I have always had the companionship of boys, and I do not seem to know how to get along nicely without it."

"I shall be ready in half an hour to accompany you to the hotel where your mother is stopping," said Colonel Chester. "I have a few little matters to attend to first, and will leave you to make the girls' acquaintance, as they will often be your companions during the next few months."

Colonel Chester walked away toward the house.

"I hope you will excuse me also," said Miss Florence, in her haughtiest and most rigidly polite tones.

"With the greatest of pleasure," replied Dyke, in such evidently sincere tones that Nina was nearly overcome with her effort to keep from laughing outright.

"I suppose that you would be happy to dispense with my company also," she said, mischievously; "but I shall not give you that pleasure."

"You seem like a different sort of a girl," Dyke answered, honestly. "A—a fellow don't feel as if his clothes didn't fit him when he's with girls like you."

Then they both laughed such merry peals of laughter, though they could not have told why, and became friends immediately.

"Florence has never been accustomed to boys, and I have," explained Nina.

"In that case, I should say that boys' society is a great benefit to a girl," remarked Dyke, seriously. "But how does that happen? Aren't you sisters?"

"No, we are the daughters of Colonel Chester's two sons. Florence is the daughter of Ralph, I of Richard Chester. Our papas are both dead," she added, gravely. "We do not remember them, or our mammas. We have no near relative, except Grandpapa Chester, and we both live here. Florence has no story at all. She has lived here as long as she can remember; but there is such a nice story about me, and the way I came to find Grandpapa Chester, or rather how he came to find me. It is just like a story in a book."

"Oh, won't you tell it to me?" entreated Dyke, earnestly. "I am very fond of stories, especially true ones. I like them as well as—well, say next to base ball and mince-pie."

"You are just like Ned," cried Nina, laughing.

"Who is Ned? Does he live here too?" asked Dyke, quickly.

"No," said Nina, with a shadow in her brown eyes; "and I do not see much of him now. For fifteen years I truly believed that Ned and Neil Bruce were my brothers, and that Mr. and Mrs. Bruce were my own papa and mamma."

Dyke picked up a dead pecan twig, took out his jack-knife, and seating himself on a mossy knoll, where Nina had already secured a seat, prepared to whittle and listen.

The ground sloped down to the river's edge, and there was nothing but the sweet, low voices of the mocking-birds to disturb them.

The river, at this point, wound about, making a small peninsula of the spot they had chosen. Large cotton-wood trees, pecans, and hackberry, grew on its banks, leaning lovingly over it, and interlocking their branches above it. The scraggy fig and the wide-leafed banana grew in the shadow of the larger trees. It was a picturesque scene which lay spread before these two young folks, who were making an effort to become better acquainted.

"I never was very strong at the North," began Nina. "We lived on Lake Michigan, where the winds blow sharp and cold the most of the year, and where the ice and snow cover the ground for whole months at a time——"

"What a splendid place to be with a fine sled and a good pair of skates!" interrupted Dyke.

"Yes, Ned and Neil enjoyed it," confessed Nina; "and so did I until my health was so poor that they would not allow me to go out of doors much in the cold weather. Well, I grew up there——"

"You mean part way," again interrupted Dyke, with a quizzical glance at his small companion, who, although older than himself, was much smaller.

"I'll never get my story told, if you keep interrupting me," cried Nina, with a pretty show of impatience. "It was not like this place, though it had a grand beauty all its own, and the roar of old Lake Michigan sang us to sleep at night. But oh, Dyke"—lowering her voice confidentially, and glancing apprehensively toward the house—"every one there loved God. I did not know that there were people in the world who did not believe in him, until I came South."

Dyke gave a low whistle, and began to whittle the pecan stick.

"I didn't mean to whistle," he said, apologetically. "When a fellow's pretty well used to it the whistle comes out without thinking."

"It is so beautiful to live among people who love God," continued Nina, with a little sigh.

"They didn't need any revivals there, did they?" asked Dyke, with some interest.

"Oh, yes! they were not all Christians, by any means," said Nina, hasting to correct any wrong impressions Dyke might have received of her old home. "But—I may as well tell you, for you will soon know it. Grandpapa Chester and Florence do not believe in God at all; and they think that Christ was just like any man."

She expected to shock her companion with this statement; but the boy had been inside of a church only three

times in his life—once to see how it looked in there; once to a Christmas tree, where every boy in the congregation, except himself, received a present; and once when Blossom was carried there, and his heart had ached so that he had not heard what the minister said—and he saw nothing appalling in her statement, and remained silent.

Nina gave a little sigh of disappointment, and continued her story.

“I took so many colds, and my cough grew so bad, that Elder Williams—Elder Williams was the pastor of *our* church—and Dr. Downey decided that I must spend the winter at the South. Papa Bruce was very poor, and could not come with me. So they planned to send one of the boys with me; and Ned and I came to Texas alone.”

“You must have had jolly times, especially Ned,” remarked Dyke, appreciatively.

“Yes; only we both felt the responsibility of the undertaking,” replied Nina, gravely. “We had but little money, and Ned was obliged to earn one way. Mr. Thornton, here in the city, got Ned a position as brakeman on the railroad, and ——”

“I’m going to see him, and see if he will get me a place,” exclaimed Dyke, excitedly.

“There’s something better in store for you, I think,” said Nina, in quite an elderly manner.

"As if anything could be better," he said, contemptuously. "But go on with your story. You were telling me how you came to find out that you belonged to Uncle Andrew."

"It all came about through my locket," continued Nina. "Here it is." And she laid a pretty, curiously-wrought locket in Dyke's hand.

"It is a very nice locket," he said; "but how *could* this have anything to do with it?"

"One day I heard that Florence wanted to buy some hair to match her own. Mine, you notice, is just the color of hers."

"But what did she want of more hair?" he asked, suspending operations on the pecan stick—awaiting her reply.

"Her own came out when she had the fever, and she wanted some to—to——"

"To make her a wig," he suggested, merrily; and made a mental note of the fact for future reference, in case an opportunity to utilize this important piece of information presented itself.

"I came here and sold her the hair——"

"And Uncle Andrew saw you and claimed you as his granddaughter," interposed Dyke.

"No, he was not here; but in Florence's room I saw a locket just like mine."

"There are, probably a hundred just like it in the world," remarked Dyke, gravely.

"Grandpapa Chester says there are only these two," resumed Nina. "If there had been more of them he never would have looked at me so closely that time in the cars; but that comes afterward. It all happened this way: Grandpapa Chester went into Florence's room after I had gone, and seeing the locket, thought he would take it with him to El Paso, because he expected to be away several days, and the locket contains a good picture of Grandmamma Chester. He did not tell Florence that he had taken the locket, and when she missed it she thought I had stolen it. She came, in her carriage, to the place where Ned and I were boarding, and found I had a locket like hers. Then she was sure I had taken it. She took mine away with her, and I felt almost like a thief. It was all so strange."

"So she was the thief, after all," chuckled Dyke.

"She did not know about the other locket," said Nina. "The next time Ned went on his trip, I went with him; and on the train, as we were coming back, was Grandpapa Chester. I had been writing on a paper which blew into his seat," she continued; "and when he turned to hand it to me, he grew quite pale. You will not wonder at it when you see the painting of Grandmamma Chester, as a girl. I look so very much like she did

then. For one moment, it seems, he thought I was grandmamma. There was a girl with me who knew all about the locket, and she told him the whole story—how Florence had accused me of stealing her locket, and how she had taken mine away with her—and everything. Then he showed me the locket he had with him. It was exactly like mine, even to the locks of hair, and the picture in a secret place, which I had never seen until Florence showed it to me, as proof that it was her locket.”

“I reckon that he knew his other son had the other locket, and he knew in a minute where yours came from,” suggested Dyke.

“Yes, and he knew that his son Richard had a little daughter, named Nina; but he supposed that the whole family were drowned in Lake Michigan, when I was a baby. Every one on board the vessel was drowned but me. I was washed ashore with my locket, containing my first name, and the date of my birth, and Papa Bruce found me. He advertised for my friends; and as no one came to claim me, they kept me as their own—and never were own parents kinder, or more loving than they,” added Nina, with a mist of tears in her eyes.

“If I had been in their place I wouldn’t have given you up,” said Dyke, with a glance of real admiration at the girl who had made him forget his unpleasant introduction to her, a short time since. “No possible chance

that Miss Florence would forget it, or allow him to, either," he thought.

"They were very poor," said Nina, "and Grandpapa Chester has been very kind to them. They loved me so dearly, and it would have broken my heart to part with them; so he brought them all here, and has given them a lovely ranche for their home. Some time you must go with me to visit them. You will have such a good time."

"I shall be glad to go," said Dyke, forgetting his intention, a short time since, to seek his fortune in some distant place. He began to think that life at Uncle Andrew's would not be so bad after all; for Nina was not a young lady, but only a bright, entertaining, or, as he would have expressed it, a jolly, girl.

"My half an hour was a long one," remarked a pleasant voice. At which they both turned and saw Colonel Chester coming towards them. "I hope the time has not seemed long."

"Not over ten minutes," asserted Dyke, emphatically.

"I knew that Nina could make it slip away quickly, if any one could," Colonel Chester said, stooping to kiss his favorite grandchild.

"But come now," he added, more briskly. "We have kept your poor mother waiting too long already."

CHAPTER III.

A LITTLE DISCUSSION.

UNDER the wide-spreading branches of a giant pecan tree, a young girl stood one autumn day, and gazed upon the scene spread before her with appreciative eyes. She had not as yet become accustomed to Southern scenery in all its varied aspects, having spent but a few months of her young life in the "sunny South."

Before her wound the San Antonio River, overshadowed by immense trees that clasped their huge arms across from either side, and interlocked their smaller branches.

It was at the sunset hour. In any clime a beautiful sunset must call forth admiration; and especially are those favored, who have been permitted to behold a sunset at the far South, when God's wondrous glory, like a vast panorama, is unrolled before them.

Nina Chester stood quite still on the banks of the river, and gazed beyond it to the distant Western sky.

A small green lizard, with bright, bead-like eyes, crawled close to her very feet, almost touching the hem of her pretty cambric dress. Her thoughts were wholly ab-

sorbed in the sunset glory, and she did not start at the proximity of the little creature, harmless in itself; but which usually inspired her, involuntarily, with a sense of terror.

Fold upon fold of billowy, fleecy clouds sailed slowly, majestically across a throbbing, fathomless expanse of blue; more brightly, more intensely blue than any ever produced by painter's brush.

A troubled shadow was on her face, and deepened in her brown eyes.

"Clar'! for goodness, Mis' Nina, yo' done forgot yo' sha'l," called out a shrill voice in the distance, as a small dusky figure darted down the lawn from the house, which stood back from the river on a slight eminence.

"Aunt Dinah, she charge me berry 'ticular to see yo' hab yo' shawl when de dew am a-risin', or the fogs am a-fallin', an' here yo' is wivout it, a-stan'in' by de ribber in dem slippers. Do'n' yo' know yo's gwin tu ketch yo's death? Why, chile, it's drefle keerless ob yo' a-doin so."

Nina smiled at the quaint little creature, whose age could not have been much more than half her own, and who reprimanded her in such an authoritative manner.

"I'se clar done out wiv de 'sponsibility ob yo' two misses, I is," sighed Gipsy, dolefully, seating herself on the trunk of a fallen tree, which had been left undis-

turbed where the hand of time had cast it, because its position gave a certain mystic beauty to the place.

"Well, Gipsy, you may be excused from further attendance upon me to-day," said Nina. "I am thinking about something which troubles me very much; and I want to be alone."

"Yo'll tink so hard yo'll drap yo' shawl, an' ketch cold, an' den Aunt Dinah'll say 'dat chile Gyp ain't to be trusted, no how, an' Massa Chestah an' Miss Flossie'll say 'at little nigs like me ain't no 'count. I'll set right still, Miss Nina, but I 'fers to stay. Yo' can tink all yo' wants to; I won't 'sturb yo' the leastest mite."

And the child settled herself in a more comfortable position, with a determination on her small black face, which seemed to defy contradiction.

Nina walked nearer to the river's edge, and continued to watch the vivid flames of color which illumed the Western sky. Carmine, and gold, and amethyst, were resplendent against the darker background, and the whole earth and sky seemed flooded with rosy mist.

"Oh, it is beautiful, beautiful," sighed Nina. "All earth and heaven is beautiful. Who made it all if there is no God? Who gives the flowers rain, that they may unfold their wondrous beauty? Who piles up the mountains in rugged grandeur? Who bids the seasons each to yield in turn buds, and blossoms, and grain for man's use

and enjoyment? Whose wisdom is so plainly revealed in all the workings of nature, if not God's?"

"Oh! my Heavenly Father! whom I have loved, and trusted, and worshiped, for more than fifteen years, must I lose you now? Can I live without the guiding hand which has been my shelter and my comfort in times of doubt and trouble? Will they prove to me, some day, that there is no God? that my blessed Saviour was only a man, like other men? and that the joy which fills my heart because I have perfect trust in him, is all a delusion?"

Unconsciously her small hands clasped in the fervor and intensity of her emotions.

"Florence ridicules my religion, and Grandpapa Chester frowns on me whenever the subject is mentioned. They both lament my superstitious schooling, as they call my happy life spent with papa and mamma Bruce, with dear Elder Williams for my instructor. And Grandpapa Chester said—this very day—that I had been allowed to go on in this dreadful way long enough. He had hoped—those were his very words—that I would become convinced of my error by reading the books in his library, and by new associates and surroundings. I have never read one of those dreadful books; and my heart is always so full of God's goodness, that there is no room for a doubt to creep in; but now he"—with a piti-

ful quiver in her voice—"he says that my case requires more rigid treatment. I do not know what he will do. Take my Bible away from me, perhaps; refuse to allow me to attend church; deny me the privilege of visiting papa and mamma Bruce at Live Oaks; and oh! worst of all, compel me to read those awful books, which make me shiver just to look at them. It is dreadful to think of the creatures God has made sitting in judgment against their Maker, and filling great shelves with books in a vain attempt to overthrow the one Book that God has given us."

Then, as the short, Southern twilight closed about her, and the last of the sunset's flashes flamed across the sky, Nina raised her voice once more in an earnest supplication:

"Help me, oh my Father! who art strong and able to fight this battle for me, and then the way which seems so dark to me now shall be plain before me. Help me to keep my faith in thee, and grant my heart's desire."

"And what is your heart's desire, dear?" asked a pleasant voice near her.

Colonel Chester had come upon her suddenly. His footsteps had made no sound on the grassy lawn. He had heard but a part of the last sentence she had spoken. His voice would have lost its pleasant tone, had he known she was addressing her Heavenly Father. As it was, he

thought it was some girlish desire to which she was giving expression; and he mentally decided, that if it lay in his power to grant it, it should be done.

She turned her startled eyes, and saw him standing before her, with such a kindly expression on his face, that it did not seem possible that he could be angry with her because she loved and trusted God.

"Oh, grandpapa," she said, coming close to him, and laying both tender little hands entreatingly on his arm, "you have done so much for me to make my life happy. You never refuse me any request that you can grant, and it seems so ungrateful in me not to be perfectly happy with you; but——"

"Well, puss?" He pinched her pink cheek, playfully.

"I—oh, grandpapa! there is one thing I do desire so much. I could be happy if you had not this beautiful home, and all the nice things to lavish upon me. I could be very happy with you in one of those little adobe houses, with no servant at all, and just me to cook and make tea for you, if——"

He smiled encouragingly; and she continued, apprehensively:

"If you loved God, and——"

"Stop, Nina!" his voice thundered, in its deepest bass. The benevolent expression went out of his eyes, the

kindly look fled from his face, and a stern displeasure took their place.

"Sit down here, Nina," he said, in grave tones, leading the trembling girl to the fallen tree, from which Gipsy had fled precipitately, a wild terror on her ebony face and in her distended eyes, the moment Colonel Chester's angry tones reached her.

"I 'clar' fo' goodness ef it ain't a' comin' now, fo' sure," her trembling lips articulated. "Miss Nina bettah be car'ful how she rouses him. He's like a big storm-wind when he's wild. I'd better warn Aunt Dinah an' de rest to keep out ob his way; an' I 'vises Gyp to make herself scarce till it blows ober."

Colonel Chester led his granddaughter to a seat, in courtly solemnity.

"Nina," he began, gravely, "it is time I had a serious talk with you on this subject. My ideas concerning God and religion are not thoughtlessly acquired, by any means. I have studied the subject with the wisest, most brilliant minds in the world to assist me in arriving at correct conclusions. If I thought your present delusion would do you no harm, I would not interfere; but I believe that superstitions, and wrong ideas of life, are weakening to the intellect and to the moral force which governs our actions. You consider me a good man, and a just one. Do you not?"

“Yes, sir.”

“And yet my record has been a moral one, a voluntary one, builded by my own strength and integrity of purpose. I ask no assistance from a higher power. I acknowledge no higher power than man’s own will and determination to do right. On the other hand, behold the miserable, self-acknowledged weakness of him who relies wholly on God’s strength, God’s wisdom, God’s infinite mercy. Let me ask you, Nina, is there any real manhood or womanhood in such an existence as this?”

At this moment, Dyke came across the lawn to where Colonel Chester and Nina were sitting; and without waiting for Nina’s reply, Colonel Chester accosted the boy.

“Come here, Dyke,” he called. And then, as Dyke approached—“I do not know what your religious training may have been in the past; but I wish you to listen to our conversations on the subject.”

“Precious little religious training I’ve had,” remarked Dyke, dryly, as he flung himself on the grass at their feet. “Mamma doesn’t believe there is any God, or heaven, or that other place, or anything at all. I think she did sort o’ half-way believe something of the kind once; but when papa drank up everything, and kept getting worse all the while, and our home was sold, and Blossom died, why then she just said she’d rather not

believe at all than to think God could be so cruel to one of the creatures he had made."

A sudden light came into Nina's downcast eyes.

"That is it," said Colonel Chester, appreciatively. "Taking it for granted that there is a God, why does he allow all these miseries to come upon humanity?"

"Grandpapa, don't you think we have the power to do as we choose?" asked Nina.

"Certainly, most certainly."

"Then, if you took an ax, and cut your hand off, would God be to blame for it?"

"No, of course not. I alone would be responsible for such an insane action, unless my brain was crazed. I would have to be demented to do anything like that. People do not attempt such rash things, Nina."

"Well, suppose you took poison," continued Nina. "Something which had killed hundreds of others, and you knew it?"

"The case is similar to the other," he replied, with the least suspicion of irritability in his voice.

"Yes, just the same; but I want you to see it as I do," replied the girl, earnestly. "Suppose the poison, which was taking hundreds of people every year into their graves, had no real bad effect at first—that is, in small doses; but almost always there came a time when the dose would be large enough to kill. What would you

say about the man who began to taste of it, knowing all the time what it had done for others?"

"*I'd* call him a downright fool," cried Dyke, indignantly. "But there never was such a fool, I know."

"And you, grandpapa?" questioned Nina, earnestly—"would you think God responsible for that man's death, if he kept taking the poison which he knew had killed others, and would in all probability kill him, sooner or later? Would God be responsible for that?"

"No, hardly, in such a case as that."

"Then suppose the poison cost a great deal of money, and unfitted the man for work while he was taking it, so that he could not earn more; and suppose that it took all he had ever earned to keep him supplied with it—ought God to be blamed because he was poor?"

"No one with a spark of sense would do it," exclaimed Dyke.

"Of course, the man's wife and children would suffer. But ought people to say, 'How cruel God is not to feed and clothe them,' when all the time the man was doing everything in his power to deny them comforts?"

"Nina," said Colonel Chester, "what are you trying to prove?"

"That God is *never* responsible for the dreadful things laid up against him," she replied quickly, with a flush on her cheeks.

"But wasn't God to blame—if there is a God—for all the sorrow which came to mamma?" asked Dyke.

"Your papa drank all the poison which had killed others, Dyke. He knew it had killed them, and made their homes wretched, and yet he drank it. Who is to blame for your mamma's misery—God, or rum?"

"Rum, of course. I see it as plain as day," cried Dyke, exultantly. "I'm going to tell mamma the very things you've said to-day. She never would see it, if she thought I was talking of rum at first; but I'll blind her, as you did us, with the ax, and so forth."

"Granted that many of our ills are the results of our own wrong-doing," said Colonel Chester. "Still, how do you excuse God in the case of sickness and death?"

"That's so, how do you?" cried Dyke, wriggling about as the discussion waxed more interesting. "That's the main thing mamma has laid up against God—little Blossom's death."

"I remember you told me that it was a very cold morning, and Blossom had no shoes," said Nina. "And your mamma sent her on an errand, and she took cold. Who was to blame because she had no shoes?"

"Papa. He drank them all up."

"And who was to blame that she went out into the cold?"

"Mamma. She has blamed herself ever since. But

Blossom had been out of doors before on cold days, and hadn't taken cold; and mamma needed the errand done right bad, and I wasn't there, and she was too busy to go herself."

"There are plenty of excuses for people, and none for God," replied Nina, sadly. "And yet your mamma knew that there were great chances of her taking cold—about as much danger of it as there would have been of burning her hand if she put it in the fire."

"Uncle Andrew, I guess that Nina has come out ahead of us this time, and we'll have to give up that God isn't responsible for our misfortunes."

"That has nothing to do with the case," said Colonel Chester, severely. "All this discussion is in view of there being a God; and the fact I wish impressed upon your minds is that there is no such being at all."

"But if there is, he is a just God, as far as we are concerned," returned Dyke.

Colonel Chester frowned. He had hoped to prove conclusively that in case God existed, he was cruel and unjust; and this simple child, whom he had regarded as too trusting and credulous, believing what others told her without a thought of her own, had shown him that she had deeper thoughts than he imagined possible. As yet, he had not gained the vantage ground he had expected to reach in a few well-chosen sentences.

If he could once prove to Nina that the God she loved was cruel, tyrannical, and altogether unworthy of her adoration, it would be much easier to convince her that there was no God at all. He hoped to show her, through scientific researches, that the world had come into existence independent of this mystical power, to which she attributed all things. The girl's simple arguments had disconcerted him somewhat, though he would not acknowledge the fact. Her tact in laying before him the truth she wished to illustrate, in a form foreign to the subject, and then making the application after having gained his opinion, had brought the matter before him in a new light. Colonel Chester was a just man, and he acknowledged one truth he had never admitted before, viz.: that many of the ills and misfortunes of life attributed to God, are entirely the result of man's own actions and wrong doing.

This much had Nina gained in that conversation by the river. What had Colonel Chester gained in his short argument?

"To prove to your young minds that there is no God, I shall mark some passages and chapters in works I have on the subject, written by wise men, grown gray in the study of science and nature's laws. My first object will be, to prove that the world has existed thousands of years beyond the time mentioned in the Bible as its creation.

I shall insist that you read these passages; or, better, I will read them to you myself. We will set apart a certain time each day for this reading. I deem it essential for you to gain a knowledge of these things."

"Grandpapa, is this to be a fair contest?" inquired Nina, half mischievously, half seriously.

"Certainly, my dear. I do not intend to be unjust in the matter. I want you to be thoroughly convinced, as Florence already is; and this could not be if I denied you the privilege of asking questions."

"Then," said Nina, "although it makes cold shudders go all over me to think of being obliged to listen to those arguments, I will do so, if you will allow me to read aloud one chapter in a book I have, for every chapter you read; if I may bring one illustration; one conclusion; one little story for every such an one you read?"

"That's only fair, Uncle Andrew," shouted Dyke, joyously.

"And this book, Nina—is it the Bible?" Colonel Chester asked.

"Yes, sir, it is," she replied, with a glad uplifting of the brown eyes, which never met his own without reminding him of his dead wife. "You have whole book-shelves filled with worldly wisdom, which you are going to bring forth to convince me. I have only one book—God's book. You have a long life-time of study and thought

to assist you in selecting the right passages, and the most convincing arguments to expound. I have only my love of God, and my reliance on him to help me, and to guide me in seeking the words which shall reveal him in his glory as Creator of heaven and earth, and of the men who wrote those books. You surely need have no fear of a little girl like me, and her one book."

"No, indeed," he hastened to reply. "I have no fear, except that you will occupy so much of our precious time with your book of fairy tales, that we shall all, probably, go to sleep while you are reading."

"I will promise to keep you awake," she said, laughing; her old joyousness coming back at his reluctant consent.

"Very well. Then we will drop the subject for the present, and I will tell you the errand which brought me here. You young folks have noticed what beautiful fall weather we are having?"

"It is delightful," exclaimed Nina, rapturously. "Why, grandpapa," she added, in amazement, "while we have been talking the moon has risen and the stars have come out. There never were such beautiful evenings in all the world as these."

"And yet," said Colonel Chester, "although day has finished and night begun, still there is no suspicion of unwholesome dampness in the air. Now, what I want to

propose to you, is a visit to the old Spanish Mission tomorrow."

"I second the motion," cried Dyke, in exultation, rolling over on the ground by way of emphasis.

"Oh, grandpapa, it will be such enjoyment," added Nina, enthusiastically.

"We will make a sort of family picnic," continued Colonel Chester; "and will take Aunt Dinah along to oversee the eatables, and Gipsy to superintend the whole affair."

"Of course," assented Nina. "Gipsy must not miss the treat."

"And Jake to drive, and mamma to give due solemnity to the occasion, and Florence to see that our happiness does not go beyond the bounds of strict propriety, and Uncle Andrew for ballast, and Nina and me for filling up the chinks," enumerated Dyke, delightedly.

"We want you wholly for the purpose of climbing pecan trees," said Colonel Chester, laughing.

"You don't mean—oh, you can't mean that we are going pecaning too?"

Dyke fairly held his breath for the reply.

"That is just what I do mean. Nuts bought are not half so sweet as those gathered, and I have a ranch with enough large pecan trees on it for our purpose. So I would advise you to be up early in the morning."

"I'm not sure that I shall go to bed at all. Oh, Nina, isn't this—'scrumptious,' as Gyp would say?"

"It is so kind of you, grandpapa, to give us such a pleasure," Nina said—rewarding him with a loving kiss.

"Tut, tut, puss. I am as anxious for the sport as you. So you see there was a streak of selfishness back of it, after all."

He walked toward the house as he spoke.

"I do believe he would be the best man in the world, if he only loved God," mused Nina, following more slowly.

CHAPTER IV.

THE OLD SPANISH MISSION.

TWO girls stood on the side gallery of the Chester homestead, in the glorious beauty of a cloudless autumn morning. Both were dressed in neat, close-fitting dresses, of some dark, warm material, with jaunty sailor hats, perched coquettishly on their heads.

They were pretty girls, with lovely yellow hair, and fair complexions. One had brown eyes, the other blue. One had a sunshiny, happy face; the other a discontented, sullen one.

"It is a beautiful day," said Nina.

"The sun will be hot at noon," replied Florence.

"I have wanted to visit the Mission ever since I came South," rejoined Nina.

"Tiresome, old things. I had rather stay at home, only that one must go somewhere," replied Florence.

"And gathering pecans, Flossie. That will be such sport."

"Nothing but boy's play, and unfit for young ladies like us."

"Oh, Flossie! You deny yourself so much happi-

ness in life, because you won't see the beautiful things, or let enjoyment come to you."

"I am sure I wish I could," replied Florence, with a quiver in her voice. "I would give anything to be as happy as you are. But I believe I am discontented naturally, and I am just as unhappy as I can be. If I knew your secret of happiness I would try and get it for myself."

"No, Flossie; you would not have it at all."

"What is it? Tell me, at any rate."

"You would be angry if I were to tell you."

"There is not much danger of making me feel any worse," replied Florence.

"Then Flossie, believe me I should be as unhappy and discontented and miserable as you are if I did not love and trust God. It is such a delight to feel that he loves me and is with me at all times. Sometimes I have been startled; but the moment I remembered that God rules all things, and that he will not let harm come to me, then I feel perfectly safe."

"You have never been in any real danger," said Florence. "I think you would be as frightened as any one if you knew you were about to die."

"I might be afraid of death, and the pain of it," replied Nina; "but not of what comes after. When the time comes I shall be glad to go home."

"I am most afraid of the hereafter," replied Florence. "It is such an awful blank."

"But why do you fear it, if you believe as truly in your way as I do mine? You think there is nothing at all after death. Then why not enjoy the birds, the flowers, and the sunshine? You ought to strive to be doubly happy in this life, Flossie, because you have no hope of any thing beyond."

"Yes, I ought," replied the girl, sadly; "but I can't, Nina. Sometimes I have such a *dreadful* fear. I cannot explain it to you. I ask myself, 'What if I am mistaken, after all, and there is a God who will punish me for my unbelief?' I would not have grandpapa know, for the world, that such thoughts come to me; but they do. They come sometimes when I am happiest, and they shadow my whole life. I wish I could get rid of them altogether, or else feel secure in God's love, as you do."

"Oh, Flossie, I never thought you had a doubt on the subject. I thought you were convinced beyond a doubt, as Grandpapa Chester is. There are hopes of you yet, and I will show you how to be happy, if you will let me."

In her rapturous delight, Nina flung her arms about Florence's neck and kissed her; and for once Florence did not repel her caress, or suggest that her ruff would be disarranged.

Nina's happy, thankful life, spent in Florence's society,

though it had been but a few months, had borne good fruit; for Florence began to realize the difference between the true and the false way of living.

“Nina, do you know I sometimes suspect that grand-papa is not so confident in his way of thinking as he wants others to believe? I think he keeps all those dry, old books to help him out.”

The two girls were standing on the gallery near an open window, and they now seated themselves on a rustic seat close to it.

“Do you think so? Oh, Flossie, I pray every night and morning that God will convert him. I have not had a single thing yet to give me hope, only God’s promise to answer prayer; but if I thought that ever a doubt of his present belief entered his head, I would feel sure there was room for conviction of the truth. Have you any reasons for thinking that he ever doubts the non-existence of God?”

“Yes, a great many. One day we were riding past a miserable adobe house, and something gave out in the harness. We stopped and went to ask the woman of the place for a piece of rope; but there was no woman to be seen. We went up to the door, which was open, and then we heard a voice; and looking in we saw a woman kneeling by the bedside of a man who looked as if he was dead. She was praying to God; and I never heard any-

thing like her prayer. She was not ignorant; for she used the best of language. She told God all about her trouble—how they had come to America in hopes of finding employment; how the children had died, one by one, because they had not proper food and clothing, and now the last little one and her husband lay dying; they were starving for want of food. She then said this, Nina. I shall never forget it as long as I live. After something about trusting in God even though he slew her, she said: ‘I *know* that thou wilt not take my last child and my dear husband. I *know* that thou wilt not leave me desolate in a strange land. I *know* that thou wilt send help before it is too late, and we shall all live to praise thy name, and to do a work for thee.’ Oh, Nina, there was not a shadow of doubt in her voice, though she was in such a dreadful situation. It was like a glad, triumphant shout; there was no uncertainty about it, and the man’s weak voice said, ‘Amen,’ when she had finished. Now, Nina, the strange, *strange* part of it all is yet to come. You know how kind-hearted and generous grandpapa is?”

“Yes; did he help them?”

“Well, you would say so if you could see them now. I think he will drive past there to-day. Grandpapa gave them money and provisions. He sent a doctor there, and every word of that woman’s prayer was answered. They

told grandpapa that God had sent him there, and that he was God's agent to answer their prayer. Well, Nina, after that grandpapa read his big books a great deal; but I know he could not help acknowledging that what they said seemed true."

From an easy-chair inside the window an elderly gentleman arose, and silently quitted the room. He had heard every word of his granddaughter's conversation, and, strange as it may seem, he was not angry.

At that moment the carriage and the wagon drove up to the side entrance, and Jake shouted, "All aboard!" which was the signal for a general confusion in and about the house.

Mrs. Randall came out with her arms loaded with extra wraps for herself and the girls. Aunt Dinah, feeling the responsibility of her position, and gorgeously arrayed in gown and turban representing all the brilliant colors of the rainbow, came walking out from the back door, with a lunch-basket in one hand, and a tin pail in the other.

Gipsy sprang down the path leading to the wagon. Dyke could not resist one hearty "hurrah," and one toss of his hat in the air by way of emphasis. Nina and Florence walked to the carriage arm in arm, and Colonel Chester brought up the rear.

Then began the business of stowing them all away.

"Let me 'sist yo' inter de kerrage, Aunt Dinah," said Jake, with his most deferential bow. "Han' me de lunch-basket fust. Dis kerrage takes de provisions an' de combustables ; so come, let me lead yo' in."

"Now, yo' Jake, jes' you keep yo' mouf to yo'sel, an' min' yo' own business," said Aunt Dinah, severely. "None of yo' liv'ty on dis occaseion."

Mrs. Randall and the two girls occupied the inside of the family carriage, with Colonel Chester as driver, and Dyke his assistant. Following them came the light wagon, with the servants and the provisions.

After leaving the city behind, they entered a long, shady road, so decidedly Southern in its appearance, so picturesque and altogether romantic, that Nina gazed down its shadowy length in silent admiration.

"This is 'Lovers' Lane,' " Florence informed her companions. And Nina declared that the name just suited the place.

And now, as these girls are visiting real places, which actually exist in Texas, near San Antonio, and which many of our young readers can only visit by the aid of books, we want to make the description so plain that they may not only enjoy the trip also, but may see in imagination what the Chester girls saw in reality.

There are many roads winding out of the city toward the Mission ; in fact, the whole country appears to be

literally checkered with these numerous roads. This is partly due to the adhesive quality of the soil in the rainy season, and the natural desire of teamsters to avoid bad places. They are constantly "cutting across," and in this way making new roads through the mesquite bushes. *Mesquite* is a Mexican word, and these bushes and trees, which grow abundantly over what was formerly prairie lands, may be found in nearly all parts of Texas. The wood is of a reddish-brown color, and is much used for building purposes, and also as fire-wood.

They drove past fine residences, with wide, cool galleries on all sides; past cottage homes, also abundantly provided with galleries to protect them from the fierce, hot sunshine; past unsightly plank houses, unkept, untidy, but with their own miserable awnings to keep out the sun's burning breath; past Mexican hovels, built of material gleaned from the city's refuse. Cast-away tin cans are gathered up by beings who inhabit these dwellings, and who scarcely seem human in their wretchedness and degradation—scarcely human in their indifference to filth and squalor, and their contentment with the lowest kind of existence. They gather the tin cans from the refuse heaps, then cut and pound them into flat pieces, or shingles of tin. These are fastened together, and form the sides and the roof of their houses.

Sometimes these houses are built on a side hill, and a



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small quantity of the tin cans is then required, because the sleeping apartment is burrowed out of the hill, which forms three sides, and a roof to it, and there is only one remaining side to be protected from the cold northerners. In these homes whole families live—men and women, grandparents and little children; nor do they seem to desire any better mode of existence.

Soon after our little party had left the city streets, two towers of stone, with a dome at the rear, arose in view, above the dense mesquite bushes.

On reaching the Mission Concepcion, the horses were secured to the fence, which was built across the front; and, with Colonel Chester leading the way, the little party entered the enclosure.

The main part, or chapel, is quite imposing, with its dome and towers, while at the side of this, a long, low building extends, terminating in a dilapidated stable, where a meek-eyed jenny munched contentedly at the scanty provision dealt out, and gazed upon the visitors with the utmost stoicism.

The entire roof of this long addition to the main building was covered with earth and vegetation.

These things attracted the attention of the young people, while Colonel Chester went in quest of the key, which was in the possession of a family who occupied a part of the ruins, presumably for the purpose of caring

for the place—their remuneration for such service being the voluntary contributions of its visitors.

“Just look at the roof,” cried Dyke, in amazement. “I do believe there is a foot of soil on it. Only see the bushes and grass growing there. How do you suppose the earth came there, Nina?”

But Nina was puzzled, and Colonel Chester returning at that moment, with a solemn-faced child bearing the key in her small hands, Dyke appealed to him to explain the mystery.

“This Mission,” he replied, “is called Concepcion—a part of its original name. It was founded in 1731, long ago, was it not?”

“I should think so,” replied Dyke, regarding the ancient edifice almost reverently, on account of its age. “More than a hundred and fifty years ago.”

“And during all of those hundred and fifty years, the strong North winds have scooped up the old dry earth, pulverized by the intense heat of our long, hot summers; have lifted it in clouds of dust, and hurled it forward, until it found a lodging place on yonder ancient roof. Little by little it settled there; and then the same North winds, assisted by the birds, brought seeds, and perhaps tiny twigs, which took root, until, behold, a part of the old Mission house is buried, and shrubs and small trees grow over its tomb.”

Nina drew a long breath. Her poetic nature was thrilled with his pretty description of the manner in which the soil and the vegetation found lodgment on the old Mission roof.

The sad-eyed child unlocked the great front door, and stood aside respectfully to allow them to enter. She then followed them inside the portal, and watched their movements with solemn, earnest gaze.

Mrs. Randall was attracted by the small, unchildish face and sad expression, and she stopped to say some kindly words to her; but her efforts were rewarded by that same sorrowful stare.

The room in which they found themselves was large and high, with a strange and awful chill pervading it. Massive stone walls were on all sides; a few rough wooden benches gave the idea that worship was still conducted there, and images of "the Virgin Mother" and "Our Saviour," in tattered, moth-eaten garments, with ghastly features, adorned niches and pedestals constructed for that purpose. The Mission's belongings seemed quite as old as the building itself; but our little party had no means of ascertaining their exact age.

It was with sighs of relief that they filed out into the warm sunshine, leaving the rooms with their "chill of death," and their tawdry, old-time grandeur behind.

The child with the key followed their exit as solemnly

as she had conducted their entrance; and not even the round silver dollar which Colonel Chester laid in her small hand, and which was seventy-five cents more than her usual fee, had power to bring one gleam of pleasure into her troubled eyes.

It took the party some little time to recover from the depressing influence of the place.

Just as they were seating themselves in the carriage, the wagon containing the substantial part of their pleasure trip came in sight.

"I do not think you will care to visit the Mission, Jake?" questioned Colonel Chester, with a sly twinkle in his eyes.

"No, sah. I han't got much idee 'bout dem places, what smell lik de grabe."

"Jake got badly frightened once at the Mission San José,"¹ remarked Colonel Chester, addressing his sister, "and it is my opinion that he will give the place a wide berth this time."

"What frightened him, Uncle Andrew?" questioned Dyke, curiously.

"San José, is by far the finest of all the Missions," replied Colonel Chester, standing with the carriage door open in his hand, while he related the story of Jake's fright, before taking his place on Jake's usual seat, as coach-

¹ Pronounced San Hoza.

man, *pro tempore*. It was founded, or rather commenced, in 1718, and completed in 1771. It is on the right bank of the San Antonio River, and was at one time an elegant structure. It still retains much of its ancient grandeur, though vandal hands have despoiled it of its glory. Visitors to San Antonio rarely go away without visiting the Mission, and, especially at San José, secure some memento of the place—usually, a bit of the carved wood, with which the doors, casings, and windows were superbly ornamented. At length these “clippings” became so frequent, that now comparatively little of the ‘fine art’ remains.

“Some of them, bolder, less scrupulous, and with little reverence for the images which are sacred in the eyes of some, coveted the marble statuary which adorns the grand front portal. Piece by piece, the twelve apostles have been chipped away to satisfy this craze for souvenirs; the statue of the Virgin Mother and Child has been sadly defaced; and that of St. Gregory is now scarcely recognizable. A celebrated artist by the name of Huicar, from Spain, spent years in carving the statues and other ornamental parts of the building.

“But as to ‘Jake’s fright.’ This craze for souvenirs attacked Aunt Dinah severely, and nothing would suit her purpose except some part of the Virgin Mother or Child. She nearly worried Jake’s life out of him, with her im-

portunities to secure for her this memento; and the last time he drove some friends of mine to the Mission, he slipped away, while they were scaling the outer tower, and dexterously climbed the front portal, by clinging with feet and hands to the carved projections. Having reached the desired height, he began, with a huge jack-knife, to pry off the Virgin Mother's nose; determined that Aunt Dinah should be amply satisfied.

"This is the story as Jake relates it. He had succeeded in loosening the nose a trifle, when a voice in stern, sepulchral tones demanded:

" 'What yo' a-doin' up dar' ?' "

"And looking down, Jake declares that one of the old priests, who helped to found the Mission, arose slowly and majestically, from one of the graves which you will notice a short distance from the front portal, and regarded him with disapproving eyes."

"What did Jake do then?" impatiently interrogated Dyke.

"Just what might have been expected," said Colonel Chester, laughing. "He was so badly frightened that he lost his hold, and fell, with a great crash, to the ground. It is a wonder it did not kill him; but he says that he had no more than fallen to the ground than he 'got out ob dar libly,' and I think he did; for my friends were just coming down from the tower when he confronted

them with a scared face, and wildly rolling eyes. As soon as he could speak he told them his story, and implored them on, his knees, not to go near the front portal again, but to get away from the haunted place at once.

"They laughed at him, and went in search of the priest who had frightened Jake in his sacrilegious attempt to deface the Virgin Mother. Among the graves they discovered a solemn-faced goat, and decided that this was the priest who spoke to Jake in sepulchral tones.

"Jake never tires of relating his adventure," continued the Colonel, "and his ebony companions have all heard about the priest with his thin face, hollow eyes, and long, pointed white beard, who asked the harrowing question: 'What yo' a-doin' up dar?' My friends said that the moment he had gotten them into the carriage, he mounted his seat, and drove away from the terrible place, with a reckless disregard to holes in the road, springing of the carriage, or the personal comfort of its inmates, who were jostled and bumped about fearfully, in his mad attempt to get away from the priest who had come back to earth to rebuke him for his assault upon the holy mother's nose."

"Marse Chestah"—called out Jake, who had driven some distance toward the second Mission, and had returned to ask an important question—"dar's no 'casion fo' dis vehicle to go way roun' out ob de way, is dar?"

"None whatever," said the colonel, smiling.

"Den we jes' cuts 'cross to de campin' groun', an' sables a good mile, an' heaps ob onnecessary trabble an' sweat," replied Jake, in tones of evident relief. "We'll hab de coffee a bilin, an' the bobbycue in co'se ob preparation, when yo' gets dar.'"

And he turned his horses into a by-road, which would take him past the dreaded Mission San José, at a safe distance.

A ride of two miles over a delightful country road, where the winding river appeared and disappeared at unexpected intervals, making cool and picturesque gleams in the pleasant landscape, brought them to the grand old ruins of San José.

"It seems as if we were in the old world," said Nina, viewing the immense and imposing structure.

There are still traces of its former grandeur in the great, front portal, and the window at the side; but the finger of time, assisted by vandal hands, has marked the word "ruin" upon every part of the building. The roof has fallen in; the walls are crumbling away; the arches, and tower, the trembling stair-way, even the little room where religious services, it is said, are conducted once a year, all are fast drifting into the historic past.

The guardian of the place is an old Mexican woman, who comes with the keys, when summoned, and, with



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reverential hand, opens the great, gloomy, weak-jointed door, and ushers the party into what is to her the "holy of holies."

The entire end of the room is covered with a drapery of fine and intricate patch-work, in flowers and buds and leaves, with tiny blocks and tri-squares and stars and moons, and dozens of unclassified objects, neatly joined together in every color of the rainbow.

This old Mexican woman has spent years of her life in ornamenting the place which, to her, is a sacred shrine.

There are rare old paintings on the walls, defaced by time; and they are, perhaps, the only valuable things the room contains. A small table at one side is loaded with cheap toys, dolls, animals, and birds, in candy and tin, which have been offered to the infant Jesus, who smiles down upon the tawdry offerings from his mother's arms.

Fruits have also been offered at Christmas time, and, perhaps, on other holy days; and are left to add their mouldy, decaying breath to the dampness and unwholesomeness of the place.

A small portion of the room, more sacred than the rest, is partitioned off by extending a rope across from side to side. One may view the painted images and tinsel ornaments of this inner space from without, but no one must venture beyond the rope.

"I would like to see those things on the farther table," said Florence.

"Well, come on, and you shall," cried Dyke, leaping over the rope and entering the enclosure at a bound.

"Please do not go there," entreated Nina, noticing the distressed expression of their guide's face; but Florence followed Dyke more leisurely, and began to examine the contents of the table, while the woman jabbered in a confused, unknown tongue, swinging her arms, crossing her breast, and gesticulating wildly.

Nina was frightened at her frantic efforts to make her venturesome guests come forth without herself entering the sacred place.

Colonel Chester and Mrs. Randall had seated themselves on one of the rough benches, and were too deeply absorbed in conversation to notice what was taking place.

The more closely Dyke and Florence examined that long draped table, the more wildly the Mexican woman gesticulated, and the more confused and incoherent her speech became.

Colonel Chester and his sister finding the dampness and chill too depressing, sought the genial sunshine without; and at that moment Florence stooped and lifted the cloth which draped the table, and concealed whatever was underneath it from view.

The Mexican woman now became nearly frantic in her anxiety.

Scarcely had Florence glanced beneath the table than she uttered a wild cry of terror, and fled from the room precipitately.

Dyke remained only long enough to take a hasty glance at that which had startled Florence. His curiosity would not permit him to leave until he had done this, and he then followed her footsteps with a face nearly as white as her own; and Nina, not caring to remain longer with the infuriated woman, came close behind them.

With savage glances from her wild-looking eyes, and muttered imprecations, or prayers—the frightened children could not tell which—the Mexican woman relocked the door, put the key in her pocket, and still shaking her head, and muttering, walked away.

“What was it?” questioned Nina, tremulously, while Colonel Chester and Mrs. Randall turned to listen to the reply.

“A—a corpse,” faltered Florence, with a hysterical sob.

“A dead man,” confirmed Dyke, positively.

“Pshaw!” said Colonel Chester, laughing good-naturedly. “I presume that your dead man would develope into something like Jake’s ghost, if it was closely inspected.”

"I saw it plainly," said Florence, emphatically. "It had a white, dead face——"

"And its eyes were closed," interrupted Dyke, excitedly. "Uncle Andrew, I believe that she has murdered some one, and hid him under the table. We ought to go right to the city and get a policeman to arrest her."

"I think that at the most you will find that the poor creature's greatest sin is in her superstitious belief, and in that she is something like our Nina, here. If there is anything under the table which at all resembles a corpse, I think it is a wax figure to represent her crucified Lord. But we must finish our sight-seeing, and take our leave, or Jake will think his ghost has captured us all."

Dyke and Florence were compelled to accept Colonel Chester's version of the appalling spectacle they had witnessed, but, as had been the case with Jake, it didn't change their opinion in the least; and they actually thought that some dreadful crime had been committed at the Mission San José, by the black-browed Mexican woman.

CHAPTER V.

DYKE'S DISCOVERY.

AFTER leaving the Mission San José, the roads became so numerous, that Colonel Chester, who had never driven through that part of the country before, without Jake to hold the lines, became confused.

"How annoying," he remarked, stopping the horse at a place where several roads led off in apparently different directions, and undecided which one to take. "I've been over the ground times enough, and I ought to know the way to the Mission San Juan. I think that the roads all lead to the same place, however."

He therefore took one of them at a venture, and drove on. Presently he came to a new fence, with a huge gate barring further progress in that direction.

"Some one has fenced this road in," said Colonel Chester, in tones of annoyance. "I am sure it is one of the roads which lead to San Juan, and to return and take another would consume so much time, that I think I shall continue on this one, gate or no gate. So, jump down, Dyke, and open the gate for us to pass through.

There will be no harm done, if we shut the gate behind us."

Then began a novel experience of driving across ranches; stopping every few moments to open and close gates, as they passed through; but as the road seemed to be an old, well-traveled one, Colonel Chester had no fear of losing his way.

When they had traveled what seemed to be twice the distance from San José to San Juan, and no familiar object met his view, Colonel Chester began to scan his surroundings with some anxiety.

"Have you lost the right road?" asked Mrs. Randall, from within.

"I fear so," replied the Colonel; "and the fact is, I am ashamed to inquire the way. I have passed this way so often, I ought to be familiar with the place; but everything looks strange to me. Aside from this, I am unpleasantly hungry. It is an hour past the time we were to have had dinner."

"I'm so hungry that I'm all hollow inside," remarked Dyke, dolefully.

Mrs. Randall and the girls said they were nearly famished. At which Colonel Chester declared his intentions of making inquiries at the next habitation, which proved to be one of those miserable Mexican hovels described in the preceding chapter.

This one appeared to be even more dilapidated and poverty-stricken than usual, with a filthy, lazy set of men, women, and children, sunning themselves in indolent attitudes about the place.

A fat woman and a fat hog came forward to interview the strangers. The hog rubbed against the woman's stained and discolored dress, most affectionately; and Dyke, leaning back, asked Nina if she could tell, to a certainty, which was the hog.

The woman seemed to be far beneath the average women of her class in intellect; for, although Colonel Chester spoke and understood her language, he seemed to have much difficulty in making her understand his requirements. It seemed that, living all her life almost within the shadow of San Juan, she had never heard of it before.

"See here, Uncle Andrew," cried Dyke, sniffing the air, appreciatingly. "I do believe that I got a whiff of Jake's *bobbycue*. I'm sure of it; for here's another. Just let me follow my nose, and I'll take you to the provisions, which are more important at this time than all the San Juans in Texas."

"There, I told you so," he continued, as a woolly head appeared in the road ahead of them.

"Marse Chestah, bress de Lord!" ejaculated Jake, his large face radiating with a smile of supreme satisfaction.

"We los' de way, a-crossin' dat short-cut, an' we reckoned as how we mout es well take a bite to 'stain de inner man an' woman an' chile of us, 'fore settin' out in de vain quest of yees. I jis' take a peep 'casionally to see if yo's comin', 'case I reckon es how de vittals would bring yo'.

Aunt Dinah had a tempting feast spread out before the hungry pleasure-seekers. It was an important occasion for the old colored woman, and she felt her responsibility accordingly.

"Jes' construct yo' sel's to de bankittle feast," she said, with a majestic sweep of her hands toward the tempting viands spread out on a table-cloth upon the ground. A mammoth roast turkey occupied the central place, and was quite sufficient, in Jake's estimation, to bestow upon the feast the high sounding appellation of barbecue, or, as he called it, "bobbycue."

"Yo' take de seat of 'onor, Marse Chestah," Dinah continued, with grave dignity. "De head ob de table, ef yo' knows whar dat am; an' yo,' young misses, range yo' sel's 'long side ob him. Yo' Gyp"—Aunt Dinah made a dexterous movement and caught Gipsy by her woolly hair, as she was in the act of slipping a huge doughnut into her pocket. Seeing that she had been detected, and fearing to lose her treasure, she secured it by cramming it all into her capacious mouth.

After dinner, Colonel Chester stretched himself in the grateful shade of a large, live oak tree. Mrs. Randall took a book, and the young people rambled away in search of—they scarcely knew what—and certainly they had no thought of finding anything remarkable.

They had gone but a short distance when Dyke, who was a little in advance of the girls, called them to come and see what he had discovered.

They hurried on, and soon at their feet a rippling stream wound along over pebbles, and through green banks. High above this stream was an archway of solid masonry, ten or twelve feet above the place where they were standing.

“Who could have built it, and when?”—questioned Nina; for this was in one of the neglected places inhabited only by roving Mexicans; and the archway was beautiful and picturesque enough to have adorned some rich man’s grounds.

“Come up, girls, come up,” called Dyke, from an exalted place far above their heads, which he had reached by the assistance of small trees and rocks.

The two girls then began the difficult ascent; but when they had reached the top their exertions were amply rewarded. They discovered that an irrigation ditch, formed of solid masonry, like the arch, was built there. The bottom and sides of it were rock. It was full of water,

which flowed sluggishly along on the top of the high archway. The ditch extended as far as they could see on either side, and gave the place a romantic interest in their young eyes; for it was a part of that buried past, which the present generation is constantly discovering.

"We will ask grandpapa about it," said Florence.

At that moment they discovered a bright-eyed Mexican woman sitting on the edge of the ditch, with a pile of soiled clothes beside her, washing them in the ditch. A group of curious, bright-eyed children clustered about her, among whom Nina distributed a handful of lemon drops, which caused them much wonderment and speculation, and when found to be sweet were eaten greedily, with some quarreling over the possession of them.

A Mexican gipsy camp was just across the stream, and our young people found ample amusement in watching their strange manner of preparing food, until Jake sought them out and informed them "dat de kernal gib' orders tu ma'ch on."

"These aqueducts, or irrigation ditches, were made by the Indians under the direction of the Spanish priests," said Colonel Chester, when appealed to for an explanation of what they had witnessed. "The one you have just seen was probably constructed by the Indians of the San Juan Mission, as this is in the vicinity of that Mission."

"There seems to be no other use for them than as immense wash-tubs for the Mexicans," said Nina.

"And yet they were built for a purpose," continued Colonel Chester. "The Spaniards occupied Texas from 1690 to the Mexican Revolution in 1820. During this time these missions were built, and conducted by monks of the order of Saint Francis. They made an attempt to civilize and Christianize the Indians; and their failure to do so, is another proof of the fallacy of the Christian religion. "He paused, and looked at Nina, as if expecting some reply from her. She colored slightly. It was quite evident that they all expected her to reply.

"Grandpapa," she said, while the flush came and went on her cheeks, "almost two thousand years ago, a poor, unknown man preached a new religion, something so different from any then known, that every one scoffed at it; and he told them that the time would come when that religion should be preached to every nation, and in every country on the earth. Even the unbelieving ones said: 'We shall see. If this religion is of man, it will come to nought; if it is of God, it will stand, and nothing shall harm it.' It has. This was two thousand years ago, almost, and only during the last few years has the prophecy of that carpenter's son been fulfilled. There is not now a known nation on earth but has the Christian religion preached in some part of it."

Colonel Chester had not expected that Nina would be ready with an answer. Her argument was one which he could not dispute, and he did not attempt it at that time.

"Is that really true?" asked Florence, while Mrs. Randall's expressive features showed that she was interested.

"Haven't you read it in the Bible?" asked Nina, in surprise.

"I have never read one word in the Bible in my life," confessed Florence.

"Then you ought," cried Nina, with an indignant ring in her young voice. "How can you—how can any one, judge a thing they know nothing about?"

Nina did not know that her reproachful words brought a grave accusation to every one of her listeners.

"But you were telling us how the ditch came to be built, Uncle Andrew," interrupted Dyke, and Colonel Chester continued:

"In order to make their Missions self-supporting, the priests converted this whole country into an immense farm. What is now prairie land, or overgrown with mesquite and cacti, was all under cultivation. The climate of Texas is too uncertain, with too frequent droughts, to admit of successful farming without irrigation, and these ditches were built in such a manner that their farms could be watered at pleasure."

"But it must have taken hundreds of years to build those ditches, which you say, are all over this part of Texas," said Dyke.

"It took a great many years," replied Colonel Chester; "and now, if we wish to visit San Juan, and gather our pecans, we must be going."

Colonel Chester soon discovered a road which was not fenced in, and by following it, came to a mill, which he recognized at once, and then knew that they had passed the Mission San Juan, by a circuitous route.

"We shall hardly have time to visit Espada to-day," he said. "Espada is the fourth Mission; and from there to the gulf, the Missions are six miles apart. We shall not miss much by ending our Mission visits at this place, for Espada is in an advanced state of ruin, and but little of its former beauty now remains."

San Juan is not so fine a building, by any means, as San José, but it is situated in a delightfully picturesque place, on the east side of the San Antonio River, and a little settlement has grown up about the old ruins.

"These ruins are like monumental stones to mark the folly and the egotism of man," remarked Colonel Chester, viewing the fast crumbling walls.

"To me, they are something more than that," said his sister, with a sigh. "They are the tombs of hope and prosperity; the burial places of many confident antici-

pations, so like our own wretched, unfruitful lives. Only that above the failure and misery of our lives there is no fitting monument, like this."

"They are gloomy old things," said Florence, with a shudder. "Let us go away. I do not enjoy visiting the Mission."

The pecan gathering was more to Dyke's liking, and they were soon engaged in the pastime, to his heart's desire.

Mrs. Randall and the two girls seated themselves under a large pecan tree to rest, while Colonel Chester, Dyke, Jake, Gipsy, and Aunt Dinah, proceeded to fill the bags with the fine, large nuts, which the frost had cast upon the ground.

Nina Chester was happy as the clear-throated bird in the branches over her head. Sorrow found but momentary habitation in her heart. She did not know how her happy, ardent nature was hourly exerting a soothing, healthful influence over a broken, storm-tossed heart.

Mrs. Randall did not, as yet, recognize that influence. She only knew that Nina's laughter had a healing balm in its joyous ripple, which rested and comforted her troubled heart. She did not believe in the things which Nina held sacred; and at first it irritated her, had almost angered her, when the girl spoke so confidently of God's love. Then she seemed indifferent; finally, she found

herself listening for Nina's expressions of faith; and of late, she often asked questions, to draw forth such expressions, almost anticipating her answers.

God had given the frail girl a great battle to fight for him; but he was ever at her side, and while she remained within the shadow of his powerful hand, she would not fail.

Had Nina known that this burden was laid upon her it would have alarmed her. She only knew that *she* loved God, and that the rest of her home friends did not.

She was so cheerful, so unselfish, and withal so lovable, that she drew all hearts to her. Her simple, childish faith in God was so perfect, so unquestionably secure, that it necessarily influenced those about her.

Nina talked of the things which lay nearest her heart in such a natural, unassuming way, that one could not doubt it was the overplus of her heart's abundance.

It was a tired pleasure party which drove homeward in the early evening.

Colonel Chester drew rein at the side entrance of a fine, large dwelling, on the "outskirts" of the city.

"We are all tired and thirsty," he said, as he handed a foaming glass of beer to his sister, from the hands of a boy, who had come out to wait upon them. "This," he added, not noticing her hesitation, "is the brewery. A fine building, and doing a fine business."

"Excuse me, Andrew," she said, with trembling lips. "Strong drink has blighted my whole life. I cannot drink it."

"Strong drink!" repeated Colonel Chester, in amazement. "Why, Mary, beer is one of our greatest temperance advocates. There is much less drunkenness in San Antonio since the brewery started here. Beer is an excellent tonic, and you need it, after your long ride."

"I cannot take it," she said, firmly. "My husband began his downward career by drinking this temperance drink of yours."

"Very well. I will not urge you against your principles. Nina, my dear, take this glass."

He turned to Nina, as he spoke; but her white face, and wide, startled eyes, arrested his hand.

She had been in her grandfather's home for several months; her tender, sensitive heart had been wounded many times by his lack of reverence and unbelief; but she did not know that he regarded the use of alcoholic beverages as a necessity.

"What is it, Nina—are you ill?" he asked, in alarm.

"Grandpapa," she faltered, while a sob came into her throat, and nearly choked her, "please, don't ask me to drink it. I—I couldn't."

"I surely will not compel you to drink it, Nina," he replied, quietly. "I cannot think why you act so

strangely. You could not look more frightened if I had asked you to take poison."

Nina's lips quivered pitifully, and her eyes swam in tears, in spite of her efforts to control her emotions.

"Give it to me, grandpapa, dear," said Florence, sweetly. "I shall not refuse your kind offer, I assure you."

She took the foaming glass in her white hand, and smiled her delight over its amber contents.

And Nina, poor child, her happy day was hopelessly spoiled. Her life had been so different, in every sense, from the one she was now living. The things which she held sacred, were here laughed to scorn; those which she considered as dangerous, and abhorred with all her heart, were regarded as harmless luxuries by the one who was her guardian and adviser. Indeed, Nina's lot had not been cast in pleasant places, and her sensitive heart was doomed to many a stab in the days which were to come.

CHAPTER VI.

NINA LOSES HER BIBLE.

“**I** THINK it will be a favorable time for one of our ‘readings,’ Nina,” said Colonel Chester, one rainy day, as he rose from the dinner table. “It is such a disagreeable day that none of us will care to go out, and I have selected several passages to read for your instruction and benefit. I have also a fine lecture, which reads like a beautiful poem. I am sure you will enjoy it. The writer has clear conceptions of religion as it is to-day, and clothes his thoughts in most exquisite language.”

“Very well, grandpapa,” said Nina, with just the faintest suspicion of a quiver in her sweet voice. “I will join you all in the library presently.”

She rose to leave the room, but Colonel Chester detained her.

“Let Gipsy bring your book of fairy tales,” he said, noticing her evident confusion.

She lifted her clear eyes to his face.

“I cannot come to the library and listen to the passages you are going to read until I have been to my room for a little while.”

The words were low and falteringly spoken, and her eyes drooped shyly beneath his gaze. Her hands trembled, and he could see that the tears were filling her eyes.

He bowed gravely, thus granting her permission, and when she had left the room Mrs. Randall remarked:

"Why torture the poor child, Andrew? Any one can see that she is as devout and sincere as can be."

"It is her persistent devotion and sincerity which I must weaken, or it will influence her whole life," he answered, gravely, leading the way to the library. "I had hoped that time and association with us would overthrow the wrong influence of her early education; but I really believe the child grows stronger in her faith as we oppose her. This stubbornness in Nina grieves me. In other things she yields to my better judgment."

"I'll bet he has a tough time to convert Nina to his way of thinking," remarked Dyke.

"I am curious to hear what she will have to say on the subject," replied Florence, "and I do hope"—with a shrug of her shapely shoulders—"that the stories she will read out of her book will be more interesting than the dry arguments grandpapa will discourse upon for our edification."

"Well, I, for one, would like to see Nina come out ahead," said Dyke, emphatically. "She's the best girl I ever knew—Nina is."

"Thank you, Dyke," interrupted Florence, laughing, as his face reddened with embarrassment.

"Oh, present company is always excepted, you know," he said aloud, and mentally added: "It isn't though, in this case."

It was some minutes before Nina made her appearance.

Colonel Chester turned nervously the leaves of several great books he had taken from the shelves, and watched the door a trifle anxiously.

Nina was not the simple, unthinking child he had thought her, and he realized that his task might be more difficult than he had at first anticipated. Aside from this, though he did not recognize the fact, or allow the feeling to take definite shape in his mind, was a sense of uneasiness at Nina's delay. Why had it been necessary for her to seek her room before coming to the contest? Was she prostrating herself before her God? Had her superstitious belief taken as strong a hold as this upon her susceptible nature? The thought angered him, and he was determined to root it out, if possible.

He remembered how she trembled and grew pale whenever he spoke of the convincing arguments in his books. It was quite evident that she feared them. Through her fear, then, he would convince her. He did not know that what he supposed to be fear was intense pain and

sorrow, that God's creatures should employ their best intellect in scheming against their Maker.

While he was yet thinking and turning the leaves of the book he held, Nina entered the room so quietly that he was not aware of her presence until she had seated herself beside him. Looking in her face he was surprised to see how serene it was. There was no suggestion of timidity or fright upon it. Her eyes met his unflinchingly, with a grave, sweet light in their clear depths.

Nina had taken her weakness and timidity to her Heavenly Father, and he had wrapped her in his mighty mantle of strength.

"I am ready, grandpapa," she said, laying in her lap the little, worn Bible Elder Williams had given her more than a year before.

"I want you to give me your best attention, Nina," he said, opening one of the books before him. "I want you to promise that you will do this."

"To be sure I will, grandpapa. I came here for that purpose," she said, innocently.

"Grandpapa is afraid that you will keep saying over some sentence or prayer, all the while he is reading, to keep from hearing him," said Florence.

"Grandpapa knows better than that," replied Nina, decidedly. "I will give him as close attention as I shall want him to give to my reading."

It is not our purpose to follow the readings on either side—only to give the impressions created by them.

Colonel Chester read a lengthy and rather tiresome article.

“What do you think of that, Nina?” he asked, in conclusion.

“Shall I tell you *just* what I think, grandpapa?”

“Certainly.”

“I think the author has made a desperate effort to reason out something which his own better judgment tells him is beyond all human reasoning. He has piled up words, and fine sentences, and arguments, and conclusions, and what does it all amount to? Do we know any more about our past or our future existence than we did before? Has he made anything clear, with all his words?”

“Nina,” said Colonel Chester, seriously, “have *you* a definite knowledge of the future existence? Do you know, beyond a doubt?”

“I do,” she replied, so firmly, so confidently, that no one in the room doubted her belief in her knowledge.

“You *think* you know,” he replied, impatiently.

“Grandpapa, do you think you believe in the theories of that book, or *do you know* to a certainty that they are correct?” Nina asked.

"We are not positively sure of anything," he replied, evasively. "I have some other extracts to read to you."

Colonel Chester was piqued at Nina's calmness at a time when he had expected she would appear nervous, or, at the least, excited; but she had left all her nervousness and excitement in her room, before coming down.

The ridicule cast on "sacred things" by the author, hurt Nina cruelly, but did not affect her otherwise.

"I should not like to remember all those sarcastic things, written against my Lord, on my death-bed," said Nina, so solemnly that at least two of those present—Mrs. Randall and Florence—were impressed by the thought.

Colonel Chester then read extracts from other authors, and some scientific articles, by which he intended to prove that the teachings of the Bible were at fault in many things concerning the formation of the earth, and the length of time it had been in existence.

"And now," said Nina, opening her little, worn book, "it is my turn to read to you. My book has so much in it that I can only read part of it. Grandpapa, you acknowledge that the Old Testament was written long before Jesus Christ lived on earth, do you not?"

"Yes, that is a historical fact. The Old Testament is only valuable as a record of times and places, which were before other records were kept. There are many

truths in the Bible—just enough, in fact, to inspire the credulous mind with a belief in all of it.”

“I will first read you the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah,” said Nina. “It is a prophecy of the coming of a Saviour to redeem the world, which was lost. This was written hundreds of years before Christ actually came to earth, and, as grandpapa says, it is a historical fact that such a man did actually live near Jerusalem.

“A very good man,” interrupted Colonel Chester, “but not a divine being.”

Nina then read the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah in a passionately tender voice, which thrilled with an intensity of emotion that stirred the hearts of those about her.

“Grandpapa,” she said, closing her book with her finger in the place, and lifting her earnest eyes to his, “do you know why it hurts me to think that any one could write such things as you have read to-day? Let me tell you: *My Saviour* was Lord of glory, King of all the universe, and he came down from his beautiful home in Paradise and became poor, and wretched, and despised; he even gave his life—that was more valuable than all the lives which have been since the beginning—to redeem men from the just penalty of their sins. ‘He was wounded for our trans-

gressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with *his* stripes we are healed.'"

She drew a quick breath, brushed a tear from her cheek, and opened her book at a new place.

"The life of our Saviour is a beautiful story from first to last," Nina said. "But I am going to read little extracts, here and there, to show you how completely that prophecy of Isaiah was fulfilled."

She then read, in her clear, sweet voice, of the babe who was born in Bethlehem, and his miraculous preservation from death, when the king sought his life. After this, she turned to the chapter of his betrayal and death.

Her cheeks flushed, her eyes glowed, and her voice showed the intensity of her feelings on the subject.

Nina had never read that shameful act—when the Jews crucified their Lord—without feeling very deeply; now, however, she was reading it under peculiar circumstances. Not one of those present sympathized with her, or felt the reality of the scene she was presenting to them.

She read of the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane, when the hour of death was fast approaching; she read of the trial, and how the people clamored for his life; she read of the last scene on Calvary, and how the

heavens were darkened, and the graves gave up their dead, when the work of redemption was accomplished.

A hush had fallen upon her audience, only broken, when she ceased reading, by a sob from Florence, and a long-drawn sigh from Mrs. Randall.

"Seems as if I could see the whole thing, it is so real," exclaimed Dyke. "It's an awfully interesting story, anyhow, and I'd like to hear all of it—how he lived, and all about him."

Colonel Chester frowned darkly.

"Nina," he said, with great displeasure in his tones, "give that book to me. It has bewitched you. It is a weird, excitable story, unfit for young ears to hear. I did wrong in allowing you to read it. I would not have had Florence listen to the things you have read to-day for anything, if I had known how she would have been affected; or, in fact, what you were intending to read."

"Did you not know, grandpapa?" Nina asked, quickly. "Of course *you* know the Bible story; and surely you must have known just what I would read."

"Give me the book, Nina. It is a dangerous one, and must be destroyed," he replied, without answering her question.

The fact is, he did not know the Bible story. Living in a land of Bibles, he was totally ignorant of the story



Chester Girls.

of our Saviour's life and death, as recorded in the Bible. For once the strong man could not meet the girl's pure, searching gaze, and he mentally confessed his ignorance, and her superior knowledge.

"Oh, grandpapa, you do not mean that you will destroy my Bible—the one that my dear Elder Williams gave me?" she cried, in distress, unconsciously hugging it to her breast.

"Give it to me at once, Nina," he demanded, sternly. "I regret, with my whole heart, that you ever saw it. I fear that I can never undo the harm it has done you."

"And all the dear passages he marked in it for me. Oh! I can never find another like it—never," sobbed Nina, kissing her book before yielding it to his outstretched hand.

"I sincerely hope not," he replied, as he thrust the book into his pocket, and hurriedly left the room.

The sun had dispelled the rain-clouds, and a few moments later Colonel Chester drove out of the yard, bearing with him Nina's precious book, which he had decided must at once be destroyed.

"It is a shame," exclaimed Dyke, turning from the window, where he had watched Colonel Chester ride away. "It is a shame to take away your book just when we were becoming interested in the story."

Nina had thrown herself on a sofa, and, with her face in her hands, was weeping bitterly.

Mrs. Randall tried to comfort her.

"Do not weep so, Nina," she said, in a gentle voice, with a touch of the old tenderness in it, which Dyke had not heard since little Blossom's death. "If he destroys your book, it will not matter. The world is full of them."

"But not like mine," sobbed Nina. "I loved it because dear Elder Williams gave it to me. Oh! if I might only go to him now, he would tell me what to do, and I would not feel so discouraged."

"I thought your God could accomplish wonders," said Florence, in a subdued voice. "That was a wonderful story you read us. I should like to hear more of it."

"God can do whatever he will," replied Nina. But her voice had lost something of its assurance.

This girl, who loved God, was like older Christians, and was greatly disappointed at her failure to do his work in her own way. The readings had ended so differently from what she had expected, or desired, that she felt discouraged at what she considered her fruitless attempt to convince "Grandpapa Chester" of his errors.

"After all," said Mrs. Randall, warily, "if such a God as you have read about really exists, he can convert the world to himself when he will."

“And a girl like you could not assist him in his great work at all,” added Florence. “I think you had better stop trying, and enjoy life as best you can. Of what use are your efforts against grandpapa’s better judgment and stronger will?”

“It seems that they have been of no use at all,” confessed Nina, sadly, while her heart ached over her failure. “I have only made him angry with me, and he will be more determined than ever that I shall believe as he does.”

“I fear that you have injured your cause with him,” said Mrs. Randall. And the words, confirming Nina’s own fears, fell like heavy blows upon her heart. “I would much rather believe in no God at all, than in an unjust and cruel one,” she added.

“Oh! don’t say so, Aunt Mary,” pleaded Nina, tearfully. “He has been most kind to me; and I know he hears my prayers, because of the way in which he answers them.”

“Well, I wouldn’t call it kind in him to take you from among those who believe as you do, and sympathized with you, and were tender of all your feelings, and give you to one who could treat you as Uncle Andrew did to-day, when he took from you the book you love so dearly”—cried Dyke, hotly, his boyish face flushing with indignation as he spoke.

"He may have had a wise purpose in it all," said Nina, remembering how Elder Williams would have explained her unhappiness.

"A purpose to see how much you can suffer, and not give up," exclaimed Dyke. "Very kind of him, I should say."

"Sometimes our griefs are permitted, that good may come out of them." Nina was again quoting Elder William's words, while a very, very small doubt of God's kindness in allowing Grandpapa Chester to become angry with her when she was trying to do his work, was entering her heart.

"We are not won to him by the afflictions which he heaps upon us," said Mrs. Randall, in a hard, defiant voice. "When God restores my lost happiness to me, then I will love him; when he converts lost and degraded manhood into something noble and worthy, then will I believe in him; when I see signs of his power and glory upon earth, then will I trust in him; when the hand which has smitten me so often, and so cruelly, drops blessings into my life, then, and not until then, will I have faith to expect mercies when my skies are darkened in sorrow."

And Nina, poor, sorrowful child, what could she say? The small *doubt* which had entered her heart had obscured her spiritual vision, as doubts always do; and the

words which, at other times, would have come to her in answer, as happy inspirations, did not come now. For the first time in the young girl's life, expressions like Mrs. Randall's, sounded plausible. But with the clouding of Nina's faith came also a shadow over her happy, joyous spirits. Her love and faith in God had been her heart's sunshine, and she drooped without its genial rays.

So the days wore on; the whole household seemed to have experienced a change.

Nina, who had been the life and joy of the home went about with a shadow on her face, and an unsatisfied longing in her eyes.

Florence was more irritable and unhappy than before. Some of the words Nina had read kept coming to her mind, and would not be put aside. She tried to forget them; but even in her sleep they were whispered to her; and in her waking hours she found herself repeating: "*He was wounded for our transgressions.*"

"Whose? Mine?" she questioned of her anxious heart. "How could that be, when he never knew me? But Nina says that he died for all; then I must be one of them. That without his death we should all be lost; and I—oh, I am lost anyhow—unless I accept. Oh, if only my mother were alive to-day, that I might ask her. I am so unhappy—so unhappy! Why did Nina ever come into our home? I was at least content before she

came, and now, it seems that I can never be at peace again."

"It is a strange, a very strange story," mused Mrs. Randall, the thought recurring to her many times a day. "And the strangest part of it all is, that the wisest and best men of our time fully believe in it. It is not a fairy tale, as brother Andrew calls it—at least, not like other fairy tales; for men of education and superior intellect have studied the Bible rationally and seriously, only to become convinced, at last, of its truth. I wonder that I never thought of these things before in a personal light. I do not remember that I ever read a chapter in the Bible, in my whole life. I do not suppose there is one in the house; but I think I will get one, the next time I go to a book-store. It will do no harm to read it, and see what the wonderful book says—what the story is which has had such convincing power over all the nations of the earth."

"Whence comes Nina's knowledge of these things?" questioned Colonel Chester, seriously, as he rode forth beneath the blue skies, from which the storm-clouds had rolled away. A thousand rain-drops glittered on the green live-oaks, and strung their pearls on the bare branches of trees and shrubs that had yielded their verdure at winter's demand.

"It is a remarkable work, and no mistake," his

thoughts continued, when his anger had somewhat subsided. "A remarkable book, and exerts a remarkable influence over men's minds. It is a dangerous book in the hands of an imaginative girl, like Nina; but can do me no harm. In order to convince her of her error, as I would like, I must know more of her book. I discovered my mistake to-day. How can I answer the questions she puts to me, unless I understand her reasons for so asking them? She has a trick of 'cornering' me, in a way I do not relish. Yes, I see plainly, that I must understand the uses of her weapons, as well as of my own. It is well enough to read the book for my own satisfaction; so I will not destroy it at present. At least, not until I have read it."

Oh, wisdom beyond the ken of man! That little worn Bible, with many a precious passage marked by the hand of a devout Christian, was destined to preach a powerful sermon to Colonel Chester. The passage made emphatic by a good man's pencil would influence him.

Nina had lost her Bible; but could she have known why God had permitted her loss, she would have rejoiced exceedingly, instead of allowing shadowy little doubts to creep into her heart.

How little we know of the results of our words or actions! Sometimes, in after years, we are surprised to learn that on such a day, at such a time, some word of

ours guided a soul to God; and, all these years, we have gone on our way grieving that it has never been permitted to us to do one good deed, or to say one acceptable word for the Master.

Thus it was with Nina. While she was grieving and doubting, the good seed was taking root. She had done her part. There was no more for her to do. The rest must come from God. He was abundantly able to do it all, had it so pleased him; but he saw that it was best that the interest should be awakened by Nina, and then that the work should drop out of her hands.

Perhaps God does not permit us to do our work for him in our own way, lest we grow self-confident and egotistical. God's cause prospers; and here and there he takes helpers when needed, and dismisses them when no longer required.

One week from the day on which Nina had made, what she considered a great failure in her work for the Master, Mrs. Randall returned from a shopping tour, and, among other purchases, carried into her room a small, plain Bible, which she concealed in her bureau-drawer, as if ashamed of its possession.

The following Saturday Florence made an errand to the book-store, while Grandpapa Chester, Mrs. Randall, and Nina were out riding—she having declined the invitation, in order to get an opportunity to make her pur-

chase unobserved. A small part of her generous monthly allowance was given in exchange for a pretty plush-covered Testament. Florence liked pretty things; and she could not find it in her heart to get a plain, dull-covered book, when the choice of soft, bright bindings was before her.

"I mean to know more about Him," she said, with a thrill of delight over her purchase. "Grandpapa has never told *me* not to read the story, and I want to know all that Christ did when he lived on earth."

Later, on the same day, Dyke found Aunt Dinah spelling out something in a much worn and much soiled book. She had some difficulty to read, but by a most laborious process succeeded in fixing a few verses each day on her mind.

"What book is that, Aunt Dinah?" he asked.

"Bress yo', honey, it's de blessed Bible, what tells ob de streets ob gold an' de white raiment an' de great white throne an' the rivers a flowin' with milk an' honey. Whar de black niggers are washed white in de blood ob de Lam'."

"Let me see it, Aunt Dinah?" Dyke reached his hand for it.

"Yo' suah yo' gib it back?" she questioned, suspiciously. "Marse Chestah he 'lows it am only good for black people."

"I won't harm it, Aunt Dinah," said the boy, "and if you like I'll read to you in it."

"Yo' will, honey, fo' su'?"—her dark face radiated with delight. "Wal, now yo' is good. Yo' see, it's berry ha'd work fo' my pore ole eyes."

"If you will let me begin at the first of the story, where the baby was born, I'll come every day and read it to you. I'd like to read it for myself," said Dyke, earnestly.

He too wished to purchase a Bible. His curiosity was aroused, and he wanted to know the remainder of the story, of which Nina had read a part. He had given the subject serious consideration, but his wants so far exceeded his means that he gave up the idea of the purchase when this opportunity for reading the story presented itself to him. Directly after the holidays, he was to go to a school, which Colonel Chester had selected for him in a distant city; and he desired to learn all he could about the wonderful story before he went. So each day found him reading aloud to Aunt Dinah, growing more and more interested as he proceeded.

So while Nina grieved and lamented, and offered her prayers for Grandpapa Chester's conversion, a mighty influence was at work of which she little dreamed.

The best and surest way to convert a soul to God is to create in that soul an interest in the Bible.

CHAPTER VII.

THE LITTLE SEAMSTRESS.

“COME, Nina, come and see the pretty new dresses which grandpapa has sent home for us,” cried Florence, thrusting her smiling face in at the door of Nina’s room, one morning two weeks before Christmas.

Nina was not slow to accept her cousin’s invitation ; and a moment later the two bright girl faces bent, with rapturous delight, over the fine fabrics spread out on chairs and divans in the sitting-room.

“See how grandpapa listens to our conversation, that he may know what we most desire,” cried Florence, lifting a rich, dark-blue silk, and holding its shiny folds against her fair cheek. “Don’t you remember, Nina, I told you that I wanted a dark-blue silk?”

“And I said—oh, Florrie, here it is, the very shade I most admire, a lovely golden brown. Dear grandpapa, let me thank you.”

She caught the pretty silk in her arms, and, with her joyous impulsiveness, ran across the room to where Colonel Chester sat by the large east window, apparently deeply absorbed in his morning paper, but really more

intent in listening to the conversation carried on in another part of the room.

"I cannot remember when I first wanted a silk dress, a golden-brown silk, grandpapa," she said, rapturously, after crumpling his paper by crowding herself, the new silk, and all into his lap, while she expressed her delight.

"When I was a wee little girl, and lived among the white sand hills on Lake Michigan, I used to dream about it, and I sometimes fancied the splash of the waves on the shore was the rustle of my brown silk dress. I said, 'When I am sixteen, I will have my pretty silk;' and now I am about sixteen, and this is my first silk dress. Let me kiss you again, grandpapa. You have made me so happy."

"Flossie is too busily engaged examining the rest of her wardrobe to spare time for kisses," said Colonel Chester, unsteadily. Perhaps the thought of Nina's Bible pricked him. At any rate, he turned his face away from her lavish kisses, and a mist crept into his eyes.

"Oh, Flossie has had pretty silk dresses all her life, and I—this is my first, my very first"—repeated Nina, passing her hand lovingly over its shining folds.

"I want to thank you, grandpapa, I do indeed," said Florence, more quietly than Nina had done, but none

the less sincerely. "The silk is beautiful. You could not have pleased me better."

She bent her fair head, and her sweet breath swept his cheek as she pressed a loving kiss upon his lips.

The warm old heart sent up a denser mist into his eyes, and a queer sensation into his throat. When, in all her life, had Florence seemed tenderly grateful for his remembrances before? She was growing each day to be more and more like Nina.

"Tut, tut, girls," he said, huskily, putting Nina out of his arms and using his large silk handkerchief vigorously. "You quite upset me with your kisses. One would think you were famished for silk dresses. There, there, I'll buy you twenty, if you like."

Laughing merrily, the girls ran to examine the rest of grandpapa's purchases.

"The silks will be made at Madam Haas'," explained Florence; "the rest are to be made at home. I feel a little anxiety about them, because Miss Prim, our usual seamstress, is sick; and grandpapa has been obliged to engage another, an English girl, who has been in the city only a few months, and I am fearful that she will not fit us nicely. She comes from England; and their styles are probably quite different from ours."

At that moment Aunt Dinah ushered a diminutive figure into the room.

"De new sowin' girl," she said, and turned away, leaving "the new sewing girl" standing alone in the wide door-way.

The two girls turned at once toward her.

Was she child, or woman? She was so small and slight. Her fair, English face was flushed with the embarrassment of her position. Her eyes were large, and blue as English pansies; her lips full and red; her yellow hair shaded a low, broad brow; her small hands were dimpled like a child's, and were clasped nervously together.

"Can you really make our dresses?" questioned Florence, a trifle anxiously. "You seem like such a child."

"I am twenty-two," said the English girl, with an effort at dignity, which made her seem more childish than before. "Oh, please," she added, entreatingly, while her eyes grew misty, "please let me try. I will do my best to please you."

Her voice was low and sweet, and a gentle refinement sounded in its tones.

"Of course you shall try," exclaimed Nina, eager to put her at her ease. "I want you to make my dresses. I know you can do it beautifully. Come and look at them. There—is not that a pretty flannel?"

"It is lovely," replied the girl, forgetting her embarrassment. "I quite long to get at it."

How diligently those little hands of Miss Maude's worked over the pretty flannel suits, fashioning them into stylish costumes for the girls, who spent much of their time in the room with her, watching the progress of her work with that enthusiastic interest which young girls are wont to feel for anything new in their wearing apparel.

During these visits Nina and Florence gleaned much of the English girl's history. She spoke of the beautiful home she had once had in England, and the hard times which came to them through—her sensitive cheeks flushed hotly, and she looked up quickly with startled eyes.

"What was it?" asked Nina, sympathetically. "What brought about the change?"

"My father was a kind, good man until he took to drink," Maude said, drooping her eyes in a shamed way at the confession.

"And to think that any one will dare to drink of that which has done so much harm in the world," cried Nina, looking straight at Florence.

"You need not preach," retorted Florence, with a flush on her cheeks.

"I think the time has come when there is great need of preaching," replied Nina, angrily; "and I, for one, would never put myself on a level with common drunk-

ards, by serving the master that ruined them. For shame, I say, on every one who does it."

"Our little saint has got a temper as well as the rest of us," said Florence, in slow, impressive tones, while a smile of scorn curved her lips.

Miss Maude looked distressed at the storm her words had provoked.

In an instant it all came to Nina how her wicked anger had done more harm than her defence had done good. Her hasty temper had gained the ascendancy over her will, and she had said things which were better left unsaid. The ready tears sprang to her eyes, and she hastily left the room.

"It all comes of my getting away from God," she sobbed, in the privacy of her own room. "All the morning I have felt like going off into tantrums, and now I have done it; and there is no longer any hopes of converting Florence to temperance ideas. Oh, I seem to make a failure of everything I undertake. I am utterly discouraged."

The sentence ended in a pitiful sob. Poor Nina! she was getting into deep places, and only the hand of her Father could lift her up to her old peace and happiness again.

The attraction in the sewing-room was too great to permit of Nina's absence for any length of time; so it

happened that, after an hour or two of self-reproaches and tears in her own room, she once more approached the sewing-room.

In the lower hall she met Florence in her pretty myrtle green riding habit, with her riding whip in one hand, while with the other she was putting back her loosened yellow hair from her flushed face.

Nina's eyes were heavy with tears, and her mouth had a pitiful droop at its corners.

"I've had such a delightful ride," began Florence, her face assuming its old scornful expression, "and I have come to the conclusion that I am just about as happy without God as you are with him."

"Oh, Florence, forgive my hasty temper this morning," cried Nina, in distress. It seemed to her that her heart was breaking with its accumulation of woes.

"Certainly, since you desire it." Florence bowed coldly; her tones had a hard, metallic ring, and her face was so haughty, with no sign of forgiveness in it, that Nina knew her request had not been granted, except in words.

"She will never, never forget my wicked anger," thought Nina, reproachfully. "Oh, why is it so easy to do wrong—so very hard to do right?"

Alas, it is a question which remorseful hearts have been asking since the world began.

It was Saturday afternoon, a few days after Nina's sad experience with her hasty temper, and the girls were very anxious that their new suits should be finished for the next day.

Grandpapa Chester had promised Nina to accompany her to church on that day, provided she would allow him to choose the church they were to attend; and Florence, with a thought of displaying her stylish new suit, had consented to make one of their little party.

Colonel Chester had been reading in the little worn Bible he had taken from Nina. He would not, as yet, confess, even to his own heart, that he had become interested in the Nazarene, but he was curious—only curious, he said—to see what his followers had to say concerning him.

"Yes," he consented, graciously, feeling that in some way he was conferring a great favor on Nina in so doing. "We will attend church with you to-morrow, if it is a fine day."

"But, grandpapa," interposed Florence, "not, oh, surely you will not go to the Baptist Church? It is not a high-toned church, at all. The best and wealthiest people do not go there."

"How do you know, Florence? Have you ever been there to church?" asked Nina.

"No; of course not. If I went to church at all, it

would not be there. But I have heard the girls at St. Mary's say that those who belong there are—are—well, are not among the best; and, one evening, I went to the top of the stairs, with one of the girls, and looked into the church. It was a long time ago, when I was quite a little girl," she added, by way of an apology for her rudeness, "and I am sure that no one, at all respectable, would care to attend church in such a shabby, barn-like place as that. Why, grandpapa," she continued—with a ripple of laughter at Nina's evident discomforture—"even back of the pulpit the wall was dented and spotted."

"It has been re-papered since then, I think," said Nina, in a low, pained voice.

"We will attend St. Marks," decided Colonel Chester. And Nina was so thankful to have their company to church, that she offered no word of objection. It was quite enough for her that they were willing to go to church with her; and any place where her Saviour was loved would be dear to her.

Miss Maude came to her work on that Saturday morning with a headache, and the work did not advance as it had done on other days.

"She isn't going to get our suits finished," reported Florence, on coming from the sewing-room, in the middle of the afternoon. "She might have done it easily as not, if she had half tried. She hasn't done as much during

the whole morning, as she usually does in one hour. I told her that I believed she is loitering over her work on purpose to disappoint us."

"Oh, Flossie, you surely did not hurt her feelings in that way," exclaimed Nina, reproachfully.

"She isn't at all careful of our feelings in wanting to disappoint us," returned Florence, "and I know she will do it. I can see that she does not intend to get our suits finished to-day; and all the girls will be out with their new dresses. I will not go to church, one step, if I cannot have mine."

"Our cashmere dresses look nicely yet," suggested Nina.

"You may wear yours, if you like. I shall not," replied Florence.

Nina did not reply, but a few minutes later, she entered the sewing-room, only to find Miss Maude standing before her work with tearful eyes.

"Is anything wrong?" asked Nina. "Are you ill?"

"My head aches," replied the girl, with a great effort at self-control, "but it isn't that. I am so worried about my mother, to-day, that I cannot get along with my work at all. She had a bad spell last night, and there is no one with her to-day, except my little brother."

"Is she very ill?" asked Nina, sympathetically.

"We have been working very hard, lately," confessed

Maude, "in order to meet our expenses. We have sat at our sewing until after midnight, every night this week. You see, Miss Nina, because we are strangers, we have to do our work so cheap in order to get any to do, that we can scarcely earn enough to pay our rent. Mother is subject to these bad spells when she overtaxes herself; and she looked so very ill when I came away this morning. I should not allow it to hinder my work; and indeed, I have tried to finish the dresses."

"I believe you have," replied Nina, cheerfully, "and I am going to get my thimble, and help you. I used to make my own dresses, with Mamma Bruce's assistance, before I came to live with Grandpapa Chester; and I am sure I can be of some service to you."

"No, indeed, you must not," exclaimed Miss Maude.

"Yes, indeed I must," repeated Nina, brightly, "and what is more, we will put my suit on one side, and only try to finish Florence's. My cashmere is plenty good enough for to-morrow; and I do not care so much as she."

It was quite late when Florence's suit was completed, and Nina sought for Dyke, whom she found on the gallery.

In a few emphatic sentences, she succeeded in interesting him in Maude's history.

"And now, Dyke," she added, in conclusion, "it is too

late for her to go home alone, and you must go with her. Get a peep into her home, if you can. I want to know how they live. I have a lovely plan, and I shall want you to help me to carry it out."

"I'm just the fellow to do it," was Dyke's reply. "I'll investigate, and report at head-quarters. What is your plan, Nina?"

"I will tell you when I know more about them," answered Nina. And with that, Dyke had to be content.

The moon was shining brightly, and by its silvery light Nina discovered Dyke returning, long before he reached the house.

Throwing a scarf over her head, she ran out to meet him.

"Did you go into the house, Dyke?" she asked.

"They have not a house to themselves, but only two little rooms in a house in Smith's Row," replied Dyke. "But, oh, Nina," he added, earnestly, "you ought to have seen their supper table. There was a little pile of crackers, and nothing else except some tea. The room was so cold I could not stay to investigate much. The little boy has a thin, white face, and a hungry look in his eyes, and the mother looks almost starved to death. I am sure they do not get enough to eat. Miss Maude, of course, gets better food, as she goes out sewing.

"We must interest grandpapa in them; and Dyke, you

and I will do what we can to give them a happy Christmas," said Nina, while the tears stood in her eyes.

"Yes, and Florence will help too, I am sure," said Dyke, eagerly.

The sympathy of Florence was at once awakened when she heard Dyke's account, and she gladly united with her cousins in presenting an appeal to their grandfather. The young supplicants were not disappointed.

Colonel Chester responded liberally, generously; and a kindly smile lit up his face, when three tearful voices assured him that they would gladly relinquish their own Christmas presents, that Miss Maude's desolate home might be brightened and warmed.

"Send them a big load of wood, Uncle Andrew," said Dyke, with a shiver at the remembrance of the cheerless room. "Whew! but it's cold there. I'll go around and help the little chap to cut and pile it up."

CHAPTER VIII.

MRS. RANDALL'S DECISION.

ONLY a week before Christmas, and it was so warm in the pleasant dining-room that the windows were thrown open, letting in the sweet, balmy breeze, together with the sunshine. The fire gave a ruddy glow to the room, and looked cheerful, though it was not necessary.

The morning mail had been brought in, and each member of the family was engaged over some part of it.

Colonel Chester read his morning's paper; Florence was reading a letter from a young friend in New Orleans; Dyke was admiring the pictures in a new calendar; Nina scanning the contents of the last *Century*, and Mrs. Randall gazing with fixed stare and whitening lips upon a letter she held in her trembling hands.

No one noticed her agitation, and no one missed her when she rose and silently left the room.

"Florence," said Nina, at length, "have you ever read the novel by Lew Wallace, called *Ben-Hur*?"

"No," answered Florence. "Why?"

"Because I would like to read it," Nina said. "I see it mentioned here."

It was drawing near to Christmas. Colonel Chester was on the alert, listening for just such desires as Nina's. He enjoyed giving presents, but he preferred to choose wisely, and at the same time to gratify those to whom he made his gifts of love. He accordingly made a careful mental note of Nina's wish, and decided that the book she desired to read should be among her presents at Christmas time.

Christmas Day arrived, and, thanks to the Colonel's generosity and the kind thoughtfulness of Nina, Florence and Dyke, the widow and her children had a happy, and even a merry, Christmas. At Colonel Chester's this holiday time was always a season of festivity and rejoicing. Among the gifts with which the young people were abundantly supplied, was the book which Nina had desired. On its white leaf was written, in Colonel Chester's autograph :

"A merry Christmas to my dear granddaughter Nina."

"Grandpapa," she exclaimed, lifting her eyes, in which was a strange mingling of hope and fear, to his face, "did you really get Ben-Hur for me?"

"I really did, my dear. You surely do not think the present beyond my means?" He laughed at her evident perplexity.

"No," she faltered, while little waves of rose flushes chased each other across her sensitive face. "No, not

that—but—I thought—that is, I mean—. You won't mind if I read it?"

"Certainly not, my child. I am sure it is a good book, for the gentleman of whom I purchased it, a fine man, said, when I told him it was for my granddaughter: 'It is just the kind of a novel I could wish my daughters to read.' Have no fears of my displeasure, dear, but enjoy your book all you can."

He kissed the anxious look out of her eyes, leaving a glad light shining in its place.

"The dear little Puritan," he mused, in a pleased way, when she had left him, bearing her precious book with her. "I suppose the child thought I would not approve of her reading a novel; but I think that a fine, well-written novel is one of the best of educators. I do not believe in silly, love nonsense"—his thoughts continued—"but why should not the events of our lives be written down? Why may not our successes and failures be of interest to others, even though a sprinkling of fiction be through it all?"

The presents had all been duly examined, admired, and commented upon, and the entire family, with the exception of Colonel Chester, were gathered in the parlor when Nina opened her new book and began to read.

"What is it about?" asked Dyke, eagerly.

"It begins in the Desert of Arabia; and there is an

Arab, and a dromedary, and the white desert sand—and, oh, I am sure it will be unlike any story I have ever read,” she answered.

“Suppose you read it aloud to us, dear,” suggested Mrs. Randall, leaning back wearily in her easy chair. Her face was unusually pale, with a tired look in her eyes.

“Please do,” echoed Florence, “and if you get tired, Dyke and I will rest you. There has always been a strange fascination for me in desert stories.”

Dyke joined in their requests; and, drawing her chair closer to the cheery grate-fire, Nina began to read the story of “Ben-Hur: a Tale of the Christ.”

She read the beautiful description of the three wise men—Melchior, and Gaspar, and Balthasar—who came riding on tall, white dromedaries, to the meeting which God had appointed. How, riding by night, and resting by day, they followed the “star in the East,” which God had set there to guide them to the place where the infant Saviour lay.

It was almost like having her Bible once more. Unknown to Nina, each one of her audience was becoming deeply, almost seriously interested, in the Bible story, which they read in secret. And this new story, built upon the foundation of that other, in all the vivid coloring of imaginative genius, claimed their closest attention.

It was beautifully written, and so naturally related, that Nina wondered more and more how grandpapa, with his deep-seated prejudice against the Saviour, and everything pertaining to him, could have consented to put into her hand so powerful an auxiliary of the book he had taken from her in great displeasure.

Verily God's cause is prospered and advanced in ways we little dream of.

Nina enjoyed to the utmost the possession of her new book. She had no fears of her grandfather's displeasure, for he had given it to her, and they had received from him permission to read and enjoy it.

The description of Mary, in her beautiful young girlhood, especially pleased the two girls. In imagination, they saw her riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, accompanied by the grave-faced, elderly Joseph, with the dawning of a new wonder in her clear, blue eyes, which she often raised to the warm, tropical sky, gazing long and intently into space, as if "listening for voices in the air"—voices unheard by all save her.

Later on, they read of the infant King, who was born in the manger, and the peaceful influence which his birth exerted over the heavens and the earth, the people in and about Jerusalem; and how the great King Herod, fearing the little child, caused every home in the place to be invaded, and every household's dimpled darling to be

slain, in order that he might slay the one whose power he feared.

But God, watching over his own, shielded him from his enemy's hate, because the sacrifice for which he was born was not then to be accomplished.

The story then introduced other characters, and left the holy child where the Bible story has left him—in his mother's arms; left him to grow to manhood in the quiet home, with the birds and the flowers, and all the grand, sweet voices of nature for his instructors, learning of them lessons of wisdom far beyond the ken of man.

The "voices in the air," to which his mother Mary had listened, became his teachers; and the excitement caused by his birth subsided at length, until the world, in its busy rush and turmoil, had nearly forgotten it.

In the early twilight, the book was laid aside; and they all sat around the glowing embers, thinking intently about the Bible story.

They thought in silence. Nina dwelling on the Saviour's worthiness; the rest, guarding from her their secret, of a more perfect knowledge of the Bible story than she suspected.

Presently, one by one, they quitted the room, leaving Mrs. Randall alone.

"It is a beautiful story," she mused, watching the

bright embers with troubled eyes. "It teaches a grand lesson of humility and forgiveness."

She drew from her pocket the letter which she had received several days before; it was worn with much reading, and stained with tears; but they were not tears of forgiveness.

In the fading light, she read it once again; and something in its pitiful appeal touched her heart. It began:

DEAR MARY:—My heart is breaking with its remorseful desolation and longing love for you. I killed your baby, Mary, and the bitterness of my atonement you can never know. I hunger and thirst for one glimpse of your face, one touch of your hands. Only grant me this, and I will go away with renewed hope. My term of probation shall be as long as you desire, if I may only hope that when it is over, I may come to you at last, and dwell in the heaven of your love; the love I never half appreciated until, with my own hand, I dragged it through mire and misery, and finally realized, by the look in your face, that I had sinned past forgiveness. I have not tasted of that which has cursed our lives since the night that little Blossom died; and if you will give me one word of encouragement, one glance of forgiveness, it will strengthen me to battle with my terrible appetite, until the battle is complete. Will you do this, Mary? If you still have a remnant of the old love left, meet me under the live-oak tree by the river, on Christmas night. Only for one moment, dear; just to let me know that all your love for me, and faith in me, did not die with little Blossom. I will be there at six o'clock, and I will not despair of your coming until eight. God help you to forgive,

YOUR ERRING HUSBAND.

"How can I! oh, how can I?" she sobbed. "He blighted my fresh, young life with his rum-laden breath; he trampled my heart beneath his drunken feet; he gave me curses for kisses, and blows for loving devotion; but I bore it all until the night my little Blossom died. Standing beside her when her sweet breath went out forever, into the awful silence of death, my love for him, my patience with his weakness, my forbearance with his cruelties, all my tenderness for him—died then. I have hated him since then, as I have hated that Higher Power which permitted my misery."

"He says 'with God's help,'" she continued, referring to the letter, every word of which was stamped upon her heart. "What does he know of God?"

Then, after long and silent thoughts, during which her mind was weighing her grievances against him, her face growing momentarily harder, and her lips more firmly pressed, as those years of sorrow came back to her, in sad procession, she lifted her head, while a decided resolve came into her eyes.

"That is my decision, Joseph Randall," she said, laying her husband's touching letter upon the smouldering embers, and watching it blacken as their fiery breath consumed it.

"I cannot—I will not forgive the past. The last tie of affection which bound me to you was broken when little

Blossom died. Henceforth go your way, and I will go mine."

She rose, went out of the room into the wide, lower hall, and straight to her sleeping apartment, without one glance toward the great live oak tree, in whose dense shadow a wild-eyed, anxious man awaited her coming, to breathe upon his wretched existence one little breath of hope.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MAN BY THE LIVE OAK TREE.

“IT is such a lovely night,” said Nina, addressing Florence, later in the evening, “let us go down by the gate for a little walk. It will make us sleep more soundly.”

Throwing shawls over their heads, the two girls strolled out under the clear star-lit skies.

“The sky seems so close to the earth on nights like this in the South, that it almost seems as if one might reach up and pluck a star from it,” said Nina, gazing with rapt admiration at the resplendent heavens above her head.

“Are the stars nearer than at the North?” asked Florence.

“They seem so,” replied Nina. “See that beautiful, brilliant star, Flossie, away in the East. It is like a grand, magnificent diamond, with its flashes of pale-blue and rosy light.”

“It makes me think of the Star of Bethlehem,” said Florence, clasping her arm close about Nina’s waist. “The beautiful star which the wise men saw. I wish—oh, Nina, I wish I had lived when he was on earth.”

A glad, glad thrill swept through Nina's heart at Florence's words. She knew that a change had come to her cousin, and a thanksgiving went up to God before she replied, in tones which she tried to control, but which thrilled with the echoes of that glad thanksgiving:

"Why do you wish it, Flossie?"

"Because it would not be so difficult to believe in him, if one could only see him."

"And yet," said Nina, calmly, "those who saw him, and the miracles which he performed in their presence, were the very ones who put him to death."

"I do not see how they could." Florence's voice had a tender under-current of remorse, which Nina knew would not have been, had she doubted her Saviour's cruel death.

"I am very glad that I did not live then," returned Nina; "for I might have been among his murderers, and that would have been terrible. Now I have the record of his life, and that of his disciples, to help me to understand. Not only this, but I have the assurance of hundreds of thousands of Christians, who have lived in the years from that day to this, that all the things promised them by their Lord have been amply fulfilled. It is only unbelievers who judge God's mercy by the woes and miseries they bring upon themselves."

"I begin to see a little—a very little," mused Florence.

"May I ask God to help you to a perfect understanding, and a clear sight?" asked Nina, clasping Florence's hand caressingly.

"I don't know," said Florence, hesitatingly. "I am afraid that grandpapa would be very angry if he knew that I am thinking of these things."

At that moment Nina grasped Florence's arm in a startled manner.

"Did you see that, Flossie?" she asked, in frightened tones.

"What?" Florence tried to peer through the dense shadows which lay in the direction to which Nina was pointing.

They were near the live oak tree.

"A—a man's face," exclaimed Nina, trembling in every limb, and almost paralyzed with fear. "A ghastly, white face, with wild, sunken eyes, and long, rough beard. It was thrust out into the light so close to me that I saw every feature of it distinctly as I now see you. Oh, let us go back to the house quickly. I am so frightened."

Clinging to each other in convulsive terror, the two girls hastened back to the house as fast as their trembling limbs would carry them.

Once within its friendly shelter, they stood quite still under the hall chandelier, and gazed at each other with troubled eyes.

"What shall we do?" asked Florence.

"Ought we to tell grandpapa?" questioned Nina.

"Oh, yes, we ought—we must. No man would be prowling about the grounds at this time of night, unless he had some evil motive for so doing."

While she spoke, the clear-toned chimes of the dining-room clock rang through the hall, counting off the hour of eight.

Colonel Chester was in his own room, where the girls sought and found him.

They related their adventure in short, startled sentences.

"I would know him anywhere if I saw him again," said Nina. "He had such a wild, white face. He looked desperate enough for any crime."

A look of deep anxiety crossed Colonel Chester's face.

"I must see about this at once," he said, hastily.

Calling Jake, Colonel Chester went with him to search the grounds.

After a careful and fruitless search, he returned to his room, where his two granddaughters were crouched close together beside the fire.

"Did you find him?" they asked, in hushed voices.

"No. I think it was only Nina's fancy, which converted some object into the resemblance of a man's face." But the troubled look upon his face denied his assertion.

"No," said Nina, decidedly. "I saw it quite plainly. The man must have been very wicked, or very wretched, to have such a face."

"Well, dears, go to bed now and forget all about it," he said, with assumed cheerfulness. "At most, it was only some poor tramp, or perhaps a man the worse for liquor."

Having dismissed his granddaughters with a "good-night" kiss, Colonel Chester turned back into his room with a troubled expression in his kindly eyes.

"I am more worried about this circumstance than I want the girls to suspect," he said, drawing the curtains over the window, after making certain the shutters were closed. It must be one who knows that I have money in the house to-night. Fifteen thousand dollars is enough to tempt a man to any crime, in order to gain possession of it.

"It was a careless piece of business. I would not feel the responsibility so greatly if the money belonged to me; but this fifteen thousand dollars represents the entire fortune of the children of my old friend Sanders. He trusted me with the charge of their money until the youngest child should be of age."

He stood gazing silently into the fire for a few moments, then he spoke again, in tones of deep anxiety:

"I should be punished for my unbusiness-like transac-

tion of yesterday ; but anxiety for their money prompted me to do as I did. I had strong reasons to suspect that the bank in which I had deposited the money was unsafe, and I drew it out, fully intending to immediately deposit it in another bank. Of course I must needs stop to speak to this and that acquaintance ; and my watch being ten minutes slow I reached the bank too late, and decided that my safe at home was as secure as any place then available. To-day being Christmas, the banks were all closed, and I must keep the money for another night. I did not worry about it last night, for I had no idea that any one knew of its being in my possession. Some one must have seen me draw the money, and watched to see that I did not again deposit it. It is strange they did not attempt to get hold of it last night. Perhaps they did attempt it, and were thwarted in some way."

"It is fortunate—most fortunate," he added, "that the girls saw him. I must not dare to close my eyes in sleep this night. I do not dare. I will guard my dead friend's money ; and to make things doubly safe, I will tell Jake that I wish him to sleep in my room."

He summoned his faithful servant.

"Jake," he said, as the woolly head was thrust in at the door, "I have one of my wakeful nights to-night, and shall want you to sleep here in my room, to be ready if I need you. Bring up a good supply of fire-wood. I shall

probably keep the fire all night. And, Jake, get a plate of apples and oranges. I may want them before morning."

"Yes, sah, an' de wine, sah?"

"Yes, you may bring me a bottle of wine too. It will be company for me."

Jake hastened to do his bidding; and when all the preparations for the night's vigils were complete, took a large blanket, and stretched himself in front of the cheerful grate, lying with his head toward the fire.

"His skull is thick," mused Colonel Chester, smiling at the position Jake had taken, "and his intellect only becomes brighter by baking his brain."

Then the long night-watch began; for the man was too true to the trust reposed in him to venture to sleep while danger threatened his charge.

How slowly and silently the long hours pass during the night watches!

Colonel Chester drank a glass of wine, to warm and cheer him. He ate an apple; he walked over to his safe and looked to see if the money was really there; then, after making sure that Jake was sound asleep, and would not detect him in the act, he drew Nina's little worn Bible from his pocket.

"I may as well read a little in it to keep me awake," he thought. "It is a remarkable story—remarkable;

and what is more remarkable than the story is that so many intelligent people fully believe in it."

He read for an hour, then rose, replenished the fire, drank more wine, glanced at the safe, examined his revolver, which lay near him, and settled himself for more reading. This programme was repeated several times, when, at length, settling himself more comfortably in his easy chair, he closed the book and gave himself up to thought.

The chair, a large stuffed one, capable of holding a larger man than Colonel Chester in its capacious arms, was very comfortable, and invited slumber. The fire sent up ruddy tongues of flame, and crackled and roared most drowsily, flinging out warm, soothing rays, urging him to take a nap. The influence in favor of sleep was strong, but Colonel Chester's will-power was stronger; and had it not been for one thing he never would have brought sorrow and disgrace upon himself by falling asleep during his self-imposed watch. He could resist the influence of the chair; he could shake off the drowsy effects of the fire; but a power was working within him, over which his own will-power was as nothing.

The fumes of the wine he had swallowed crept steadily from his stomach to his brain, dulling it, wrapping it in a mantle of oblivion, gaining the ascendancy over his better judgment, and at last lulling him to sleep.

The fire crackled and danced over the wood in the grate; laughed, and hissed, and sputtered, and roared, and sent out genial warmth to hold him captive. Jake slept on the floor before the fire, and snored uproariously, while his master slept in his great easy chair, and joined the chorus with his heavy breathing. The door was locked and bolted; the revolver lay near Colonel Chester's hand; but that hand was paralyzed by sleep—*sleep and wine.*

He might as well have been slumbering in his bed, as in his easy chair. The robber could now come in and take the treasure; for the man's senses were wrapped in slumber, and deadened by wine. Yet, even in his sleep, his mind seemed to be burdened with his responsibility; for once or twice he moved restlessly in his chair, muttering something about the money.

After a while, the fire burned low, smouldered, and went out; and the outside chill began to creep steadily into the room. When the first pink flush of the new day began to spread its rosy light across the Eastern horizon, Colonel Chester awoke—numbed with the cold, and cramped with the uncomfortable position in which he had lain for so long a time.

Jake still slumbered soundly, just where he had thrown himself the night before.

Colonel Chester could scarcely move, at first; but after

one or two ineffectual efforts, he succeeded in straightening his stiffened limbs, and collecting his bewildered senses.

“Ah!” he exclaimed, as his eyes fell upon the revolver, lying where he had placed it, ready for instantaneous use, “I have been drugged.”

Yes, Colonel Chester, you had been drugged; and the drug which numbed your faculties when they should have been the keenest, was placed to your lips by your own hand. It was nothing, more or less, than the poison which lurks in ruby wine.

Colonel Chester next discovered that the key which had been in his door the night before, now lay on the table.

Going to the door, he found, what he expected, that the door was unlocked.

He had never made a practice of keeping much money or any valuables at the house; and the stout iron box, in which he kept his papers, was what he called his safe. This had a peculiar lock on it. One made especially for him, and could not be unlocked, except with its own key. He feared to turn his eyes in that direction, so certain was he that his apprehensions would be realized.

The safe, or box, stood in a shadowed corner of the room, and he was obliged to cross over to it, and stoop down before he could see its door.

As he did so, he beheld the key in the lock. Great

drops of sweat gathered under the edge of his gray hair, when he had made this discovery.

With trembling hands he threw open the door, and gazed into the space within. There lay all his papers undisturbed. Even his wallet, with a few dollars in it, lay where he had placed it the night before; but the money—his dead friend's money—was gone.

Like a palsied old man, he groped his way back to the table, and taking the lamp, searched among his papers for the missing money.—It was not there.

“Laws a massa, Marse Chestah! I thought yo's a spook—yo' look so white and skeery.”

Jake was sitting up on his blanket, regarding Colonel Chester with frightened eyes.

“Jake,” said Colonel Chester, dropping into a chair, and putting both hands to his face, while his voice sounded weak and pitiful as a child's, “Jake, I have been robbed.”

“Eh, what! Yo' don' tell me 'at he commed in while we was asleep?” cried Jake, now thoroughly aroused.

“Yes, he came in while we were asleep, and robbed me!”

“Oh, Marse Chestah, yo' ought ter be berry thankful 'at yo' aint dead this minute. I is,” responded Jake, fervently.

“It is gone; all gone!” was the only reply Colonel Chester made.

"We mount search de house," suggested Jake, fidgeting about in his sympathy for his old master. Jake was one of those loyal souls, who preferred to remain with the man who had owned him in the old slavery days.

"If de ole marse do jis' as well by me, an' a trifle better, dan a stranger, why mount I stay by him, an' 'sist his reclinin' steps down to de grave?"

Jake would say, when the subject of their old relations was mentioned in his presence.

In answer to Jake's suggestion to search for the burglar, Colonel Chester shook his head sadly.

Then, seeming to arouse suddenly from out of his fit of despondency, he turned towards Jake.

"Call Miss Nina, at once," he said.

"De young misses ain't got up yet, Marse Chestah," said Jake, bowing deferentially.

"Then wake her up, immediately, and don't waste precious time talking back to me," he cried, with something of the old authority which had characterized him in the old slave days. He was a kind master; but he allowed no interference or suggestion from his slaves.

At the first sound of Colonel Chester's quick, decisive voice, Jake "ducked" his woolly head, as if dodging some missile hurled from his master's hand.

The movement was unnecessary, however; for nothing

followed his command except to revoke it, almost in the same breath in which it was uttered.

“Stay, Jake,” he said, as Jake was about to do his bidding. “It will take too much time for her to dress. I must be on the robber’s track at once. I will go to her room for a description of the man.”

When the first pink flush of the early morning crept into her room, Nina was awakened by a tapping on her door, and her grandfather’s voice, saying:

“Do not be frightened, dear. I wish to speak to you at once on a very important subject. I cannot wait for you to dress. May I come in?”

“Yes, grandpapa,” she answered, lifting her head from the pillow, and surprised at his early call.

Mrs. Randall’s room joined Nina’s, and the door leading into it was ajar, as was also the door between Nina’s room and Florence’s; but Florence was now sleeping soundly, and did not hear her grandfather’s question or Nina’s answer.

The girls had related their adventure to Mrs. Randall the night before, and had begged permission to leave the connecting doors open as a means of greater safety, in case the man gained entrance to the house.

Mrs. Randall had assured them, with a sorrowful smile, that it was quite unnecessary.

When it was too late to grant her husband’s re-

quest, she repented that she had not gone to him, and especially when Nina described him as she had seen him, standing, and as she knew, upon the verge of hope. The wild look in his eyes, which had so strangely impressed Nina, was the gloom of despair.

“Oh, I might have gone to him. It would not have harmed me to have spoken one little word, even though that word contained no hope or forgiveness. I have been cruel to deny him the sight of my face, and the touch of my hand.” She sobbed when the girls had retired to their own rooms, leaving their doors ajar to protect themselves from the man whom she had once loved, and still loved, as her self-accusations testified.

All that long night, while the two girls slept secure in the thought of those doors ajar, the sorrowful woman kept silent watch, with her aching heart and her shadowed past for company. The balm of sleep had not, for one moment, visited her eyes during that solemn vigil.

Her hearing, quickened and intensified by her anxiety, caught the first word spoken by Colonel Chester at Nina’s door. In some way her heart warned her that his errand to Nina’s room at that unseemly hour had reference to her husband, and she listened feverishly, with her hands clasped over her heart, and with suspended breath, for the words he should utter to confirm her fears.

“Nina,” said Colonel Chester, after entering her room

and closing the door behind him, "I want you to tell me exactly how the man looked whom you saw in my grounds last night?"

"What has happened, grandpapa?" she asked, noticing how pale he was.

"Never mind now. I will tell you later. I must get a description of him, and capture him, if possible, before he leaves the city. Can you remember just how he looked?"

"I can remember his face. It was all I saw. We were near the live oak tree, when I saw his face quite close to me, for one minute, then it was gone. He had a long, bushy beard, and wild, hollow eyes. His face was thin, as if by starvation——"

"Oh," moaned the wretched listener in the next room, "his heart was starving, and I refused him a morsel of food."

"He wore a wide-rimmed slouch hat," continued Nina, "and—oh, yes—I saw quite plainly—a red mark on his right cheek, as if he had been wounded, and the wound had not yet healed. The night was very clear, and I saw him quite plainly."

"Your description is sufficient," said Colonel Chester, briskly. "That will help to identify him. Take another nap if you can, dear. I will try to be back for breakfast."

He bent over her and left a warm kiss on her rosy lips, then hurriedly quitted the room; and those two, Nina and Mrs. Randall, heard him going down the long hall, and out of the front door. They then heard the sound of his horses' feet in the yard, and the quick thuds with which they beat upon the hard road outside.

"Oh, my husband, can it be that you are worse than I thought?" moaned Mrs. Randall. "Have you added another crime to those which the law protected you in committing? You killed your child, ruined our home, committed moral suicide, transgressed every law of humanity, and broke my heart; but the law did not interfere. Now if you have taken one dollar which was not yours, the law will condemn you to its extreme penalty. Shame, I say, on laws which hold a copper cent of greater value than a woman's heart."

CHAPTER X.

A BLOW AT KING ALCOHOL.

WHEN Colonel Chester returned from the city he found the entire family assembled in the back parlor. They had heard all through Jake. The young people were eager with excitement. Mrs. Randall had a wild dread in her eyes.

Nina had related the whole circumstance for Dyke's benefit, and Florence had added surmises and conjectures of her own. Mrs. Randall alone remained silent, apparently indifferent to their conversation; but with a poignant intensity in the sharp lines about her mouth, which, to a close observer, would have revealed the fact that their words pierced her heart like a keen-edged knife.

It was not until Dyke, in his impetuous, boyish enthusiasm, expressed the desire that Uncle Andrew would "catch the thief and put him where he would never be free to commit such a crime again," that the anguish became too great for silent endurance; but the moan wrung from her lips, by the thought that Dyke was condemning his own father, was drowned in the confusion of Colonel Chester's entrance.

"Did you find him, Uncle Andrew? Say, did you?" asked Dyke, excitedly, before the girls could ask the question which they were as anxious should be answered.

Mrs. Randall lifted her white face appealingly. She thought she was hiding every emotion which tortured her inmost being. She did not know that her heart's anguish was clearly depicted on her troubled face.

Looking past the three inquiring faces, Colonel Chester saw the unusual interest with which she waited in breathless anxiety for his reply. He also saw the glad, thoughtful look which swept, like a mighty wave, over her face at his negative response.

"What was that man to her?" he asked himself, as with a thoughtful face he went out of the room. "There is but one man in the world whose actions could affect her in such a manner," he said.

After breakfast, Colonel Chester invited his sister into the library; and when the door had been closed between them and those curious young folks, he turned to her, and asked:

"Tell me, Mary, what is that man to you, whom Nina saw by the live-oak tree, last night?"

She did not reply, but her face paled under his searching gaze.

"Was he your husband?" he asked, with his eyes upon her face.

"Yes, Andrew, it was my husband; but it was not he that robbed you. However low he may have fallen, he has not reached such depths of degradation as that."

In silence he led her to a chair, then turning to his desk, wrote a few lines, rapidly, and handed the open note to her. It was addressed to the Chief of Police, and read as follows:

I withdraw the charge made this morning. Call in your detectives, and let the matter drop.

ANDREW CHESTER.

"Oh, then, you do believe that he was innocent of that grave offence?" she cried.

"I believe Joe Randall stole the money that I held in trust," he said, decidedly.

Her lips parted in answer; but he silenced her, and continued:

"It will be a serious matter for me, at this time, to raise such a large amount of money. In order to do so, I shall be obliged to sacrifice much; but I prefer to meet the obligation, rather than that your name be dragged before the public, in this affair."

"If he is guilty, he must suffer the penalty of his crime," she replied, in a slow, sad voice.

"I do not shield him for his own sake, Mary; but for your sake, and Dyke's. When did he ever respect your happiness in the past?"

"He loved me, Andrew. It was his fatal appetite, which caused him to be cruel," the woman said, in a pleading voice. She who had upbraided him, and reproached him, could not endure that another should blame him.

"Then his love should have conquered his appetite," he said, in a hard voice. "I have no patience with that love which denies itself nothing for the sake of the being loved. As I said before, for your sake, and for Dyke's, he must not be brought to justice. It would only be an added sorrow to your already heavy burden of sorrows; an added shame to your accumulation of shame on his account. It would be more than this to your boy, Mary. Better, by far, that we go into beggary, if need be, than to cast such a blight upon his hopeful young life, at its very commencement. I have read somewhere, that the sins of the father are visited upon the children; and I know the saying is true."

Colonel Chester did not, at that moment, remember where, within the last few hours, he had read that sentence; but Mrs. Randall, to whom the Bible was as new as to her brother, remembered, and looked up quickly wondering if he too were reading that wonderful story.

He did not notice her glance of silent inquiry, but continued:

"The memory of his father's crime would rankle in

his heart. If by any chance he forgot it, do you think the world would do so, or that he would be trusted and respected, with such a blight upon him?"

"And yet, his father committed other crimes. Must Dyke be despised on account of them? Must he be classed among drunkards, because his father was one?"

"The world regards that in a different light. It will not expect him to inherit his father's follies—only his actual sins."

"Oh, wise, keen-sighted world," exclaimed the unhappy woman, a vivid red flaming into her pale cheeks. She then added, in tones of fierce resentment: "Had it not been for the rum-fiend, my husband would to-day be at the head of his profession—an honored, respected physician—whereas he was little better than an imbecile, the last few months I lived with him. No one would trust their sick in his hands; and he, whose education and intellect fitted him for higher places, sank to the level of a common day laborer. Now, if in the insane frenzy caused by strong drink, he robs another, that stigma will cling to his boy, and the other be excused. Oh, 'wise generation,' when shall this great wrong be righted? Who will undertake the gigantic task of blotting this awful curse from a nation's record? What hope is there for our husbands, in their struggles against a mighty appetite—what salvation for our sons, when the strongest,

the wisest, and the most respected of men, offer them the drink which has ruined thousands?"

"Mary," said Colonel Chester, solemnly laying his large hand, sympathetically, upon her clasped ones; "you have just cause to feel deeply on the subject. I respect your sorrow, as I do the memory of our dead father. I now promise you, my poor, heart-broken sister, that in no way will I multiply your anxieties. Never again will I offer Dyke a drink of beer, or anything stronger."

"Thank you, Andrew; but, as the saloon-keeper says, when urged to abandon his fearful business, if you do not, some one else will. There is no safety for my boy as long as society tolerates it; so long as good men drink it themselves. I might hope to shield him, if only the low and the vulgar were its advocates. Sin is usually hideous in the eyes of the young. It is only when sin comes clothed in respectability, with its deformity hidden, that the snare is sure to entrap unwary feet."

"I see, Mary, it is a dangerous custom, at best," said Colonel Chester, with bowed head. "Never before did I realize that in my temperate use of wine and beer I was helping to drag your boy, and other mother's boys, to ruin. One never sees these things clearly until they are brought home personally. Mary, hear me. I have not willfully sinned in this matter. I sinned because I did

not see—and I will sin no more. I promise you never to taste of it again, except as medicine.”

“Thank God, Andrew,” she said, fervently.

He looked up quickly. Their eyes met. They did not believe in the existence of God, and yet they had each acknowledged him, or his sayings, during that conversation.

“Tell the children I wish to meet them in the library, at two o’clock,” he said, after a moment’s silence, during which their minds were busy over thoughts they would not that the other should know.

“I have some little matters of business to attend to,” he added. “This,” significantly tapping the paper upon which he had just written, “and other things, which will not admit of delay; after that, I want to meet yourself and the children for a few moments.”

When he had gone and she was alone, she dropped her face into her hands and wept bitterly. All her resentment for past wrongs was washed away by that flood of tears. Love for her husband, which had drooped, and seemed to have died in the distant desert sands of despair, was revived, took root, and grew again, nourished by that warm shower of tears. The star of hope, which, she thought, had set forever, shone down upon her with its steady, unfailing light, as the clouds rolled away, after the rain of tears was past.

“Oh, my husband,” she murmured, “if I had gone to you last night, this would not have happened. You were desperate in your disappointment; crazed, it must have been; for I cannot believe that you would have done the deed, had you been possessed of your right mind.”

She thought over the matter intently for a few moments, then said, with a firm conviction in her voice:

“Wherever that money is to-day, it is not in Joseph Randall’s possession. I am sure of this. He never robbed my brother. He is too honorable. Drunkard that he is, he has not lost all sense of shame; and the hand which is shielding, clothing, and feeding his wretched family is sacred in his sight. *I know this.* Therefore he did not take the money. I will go down to my death believing in his innocence concerning this.”

At two o’clock they were all assembled in the library, according to Colonel Chester’s desire.

A change had come over his genial face, which they all noticed the moment he entered the room. There was a troubled look in the kindly eyes, and an anxious expression in the lines about his mouth.

He sunk into an easy chair as if completely worn out, or utterly discouraged. It might have been both; for he was nearly exhausted with his vain night watch. Although he had fallen asleep, his slumber had lasted but a short time, and had been altogether unrefreshing.

"A few weeks ago," he began, "a gentleman in El Paso made me an offer for a ranche, which I own in Western Texas, and also for some property in that town. I refused his offer at that time, because the property is worth many hundred dollars more than he will pay for it. Now, however, I am obliged to raise money, in order to restore what I have lost; and to do this I must sell some property. I have telegraphed to the gentleman in question, and find, by return dispatch, that he is stopping at Valentine, and will be glad to meet me at that place. I have made all arrangements to go westward this evening. I may be gone several days, and I wished to tell you of what I have done. No part of my dead friend's money must be lost through me; and as life is uncertain, I have added a codicil to my will, in which I have made known my wish to pay, from my estate, fifteen thousand dollars to the Sander's heirs, in case I do not live to return."

"Do not worry, Nina," he said, seeing her eyes grow large with apprehension. "There is no especial danger awaiting me. I am only preparing for such an emergency."

He rang the bell, and Aunt Dinah, breathing hard with the exertion, answered it.

"Aunt Dinah," he said, "tell Jake to bring to me the exact number of bottles of wine and beer in the cellar."

"Yes, sah," and the round, smiling face withdrew.

Presently Jake appeared with the desired information.

"Dar am six bottles of wine, sah, an' a case o' beer, sah, an' three bottles o' sham-pain, sah. De supply am a gittin' low, sah; berry low indeed."

"Very well, Jake, wait for my orders in regard to it. Nina," he added, turning to his favorite granddaughter, "if I were to make you a present of all that stuff Jake has been telling us about, what would you do with it?"

She looked up in amazement, scarcely comprehending him.

"Would you sell it, and give the money to the poor? There are quite a number of dollars represented in the wines and champagne?"

"Would I sell it, grandpapa, if it were mine? No; never."

"Then what would you do with it?"

"I would give it back to the earth which first nourished the vines from which it was made."

"And you, Dyke. What would you do?"

"I'd break the bottles over the nearest stone," he cried, hotly; "and I'd build a smudge about it so that no poor coot of a drunkard could get so much as a smell of it."

"Well, Florence, what would you do?"

"I don't know, grandpapa. A month ago I would have kept it, and once in a while, on hot days, when I felt languid, I would have taken a glass of beer or a sip

of wine. But Nina and Dyke have frightened me so, that I do not think I can ever drink it again with any degree of comfort or satisfaction."

"Then you too would destroy it?" he asked.

"Yes. I think I would," she replied, hesitatingly.

"My children, I am not ashamed to follow in your footsteps in this. I begin to see the curse of strong drink as I never did before. There is no spot on earth so sacred to me as this, and here I promise you all never again to taste of that which has brought ruin to others; never to have it in my house, or on my table; never to have anything whatever to do with it. Are you satisfied, Nina, with this?"

She clasped her hands together and bowed her head over them one moment in silent thanksgiving. Then her soft arms crept round his neck, and her wet cheek was pressed against his own.

"Grandpapa, I felt that I must thank God first. I have asked him so often to grant me this, it would be ungrateful not to thank him when he granted my request completely."

Colonel Chester did not reproach her for her sweet faith. He only clasped her closer to his heart, and kissed her gently.

"We will all go out into the back yard and celebrate the return of those dangerous juices to mother earth," he

said, cheerfully, releasing Nina, and drawing Florence's serious face down to his own.

"Jake," he added, bring out the liquor supply."

"Yo' doan mean it, Marse Chestah," ejaculated Jake, with comically rolling eyes. "Jes' count de waste, an' de sufferin' in de worl', an' doan go fo' to do it. Dar's many a sick purson dat needs dat vine, an' oh, Marse Chestah, de sham-pain am berry 'sensive; 'deed it am, sah."

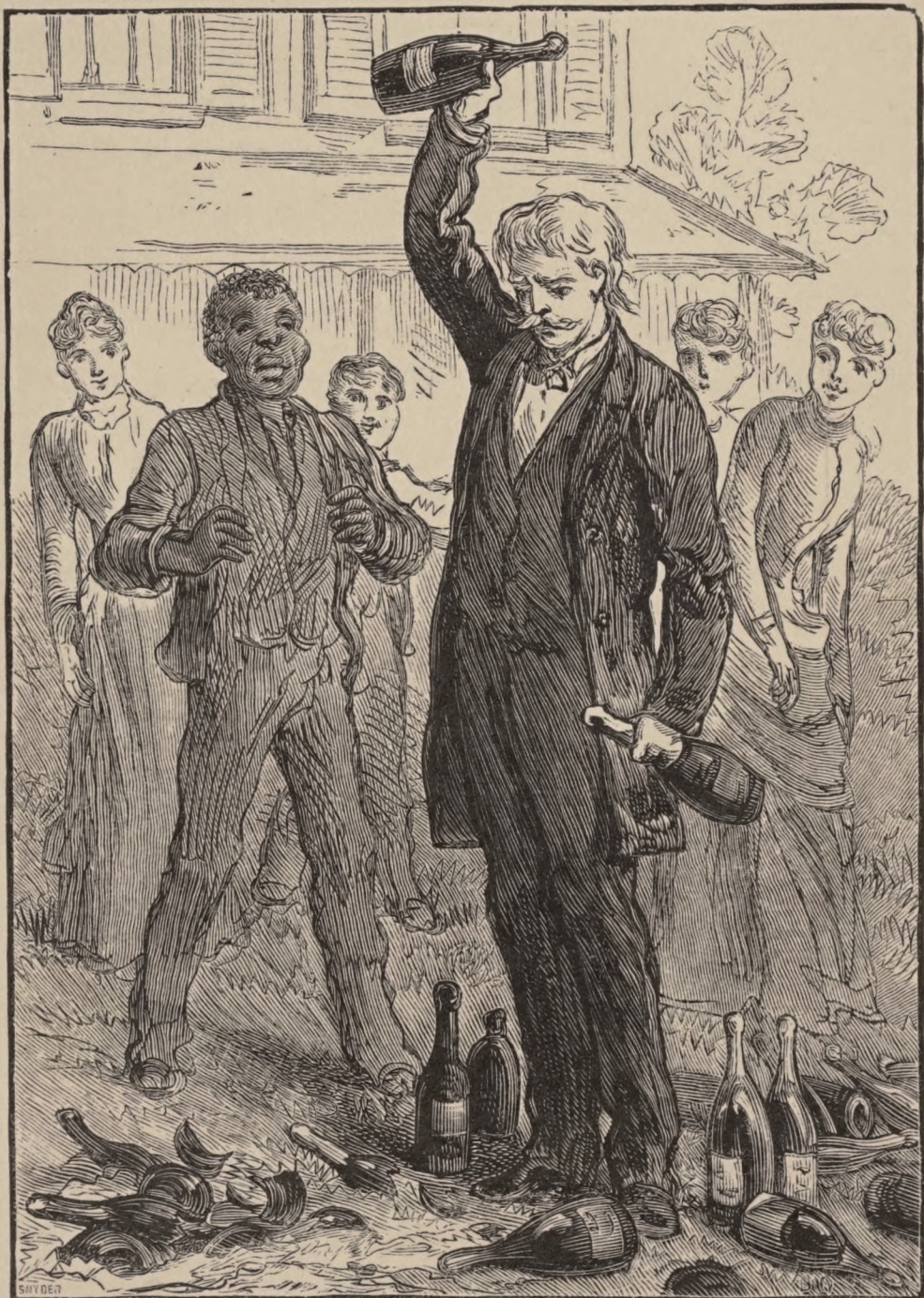
"The suffering in the world is what has influenced my decision," replied Colonel Chester, for the young people's benefit, not for Jake's. He never argued points with his servants; but he desired to make use of Jake's excuses for purposes of his own.

"But de sham-pain, Marse Chestah; yo' doan mean ter spill all dat lusciousness an' spense, sah."

"There is no sham in the pain it inflicts upon others," said Colonel Chester, gravely. "It is bottled misery—strange I never realized it before." Then, with a stern voice, he repeated:

"Do as I bid you, and bring the entire supply into the back yard."

"Hurrah," cried Dyke, flinging his cap to the ceiling, in his delight. "The Chester family strikes one blow at King Alcohol to-day. May the blows fall thick and fast until the old tyrant is slain."



Chester Girls.

"I return, sah, to say dat dar's no 'casion fo' yo' to drag yo' tired an' weary limbs out on de house, sah. I ken smash de bottles in a jiffy, sah."

"We prefer to do the smashing," said Colonel Chester, with a peculiar smile.

When the wines and beer were brought out, Colonel Chester looked them over, then turned to Jake, who was shaking as if with a chill, and said:

"There is one bottle of wine, and one of champagne missing, Jake; bring them at once."

"'Deed, sah. I miscount befo'; dar want so many."

"Jake," said Colonel Chester, in those deep bass tones which always struck terror to little, black Gipsy's heart, "bring those bottles at once."

Jake, shaking his head dubiously, and muttering against the waste, went back to the cellar, and brought out the missing bottles.

It was a happy event for all of them. Even Florence felt as though a good deed had been done, when the last bottle had been broken, and its contents spilled upon the dusty earth, which opened its thirsty lips, and drank it up.

"I hope the earth won't get tipsy to-night, and go wandering off into space, losing its way around the sun. That's a big drink for any one not used to swilling it down by the bucket-full," remarked Dyke,

contemplating the ruin a few judicious blows had wrought.

At seven o'clock, Colonel Chester bade his family good-bye, and with Dyke, drove to the station. It was a melancholy journey at best, and Colonel Chester had a trying and painful business to attend to. To replace the money lost, valuable property must now be sacrificed for less than its actual worth.

It was not a very bright holiday week; there were many things to shadow it.

Dyke felt the financial trouble in common with the rest; but the thought which weighed on him the most was that he was soon, for the first time in his life, to be separated from his mother. To be sure, he longed to expand his wings, unrestricted by her maternal vigilance; he longed to be a boy among the boys; but the sense of freedom and manhood, which the going out from home and mother gives to a boy, is saddened by a melancholy responsibility, and something akin to homesickness, when he remembers that he is now stepping beyond the boundary line, and that the careless, happy days of childhood are now in the past. He enters the portal of a new existence, which his imagination paints in rose-color; but how soon will those bright hues turn dim and gray!

Mrs. Randall's new anxiety, and her remorse for her

unkindness to her husband, were fast humbling her pride. The rebellion and resentment which she had harbored in her heart against him, and against her God, were melting away in the dewy moisture of repentant tears. Many, many hours she spent, during the last week of the old year, reading the little Bible she had purchased by stealth. Her Heavenly Father, compassionate for her sorrow, came very near to her in that week—so near that once, at its close, when the old year was dying, she knelt at the throne of grace, where she had never knelt before. Though her lips were mute, her heart sent up its pitiful appeal for assistance in this, her hour of greatest need; and she was soothed and comforted in a manner which left no room for doubt that the divine presence had been about her, and still lingered in her heart.

The two girls, awed by the calamity which had fallen upon Grandpapa Chester, and the white look on Aunt Mary's face; conscious, too, of a sorrow in their home of which they were kept in ignorance, drew closer and closer to each other, exchanging mutual sympathies and confidences, and loving each other with a fuller, deeper affection than they had known before.

Florence now confessed the purchase of the pretty plush Testament, and asked Nina's explanation of many things she could not understand.

A devout Christian had been Nina's instructor in divine things for many years, and, as he had explained these things to her, so she now explained them to Florence.

Once, during that week, the two girls made a visit to Live Oaks, the home of those kind people who had taken Nina to their hearts when she was a helpless babe.

Florence had never cared to accompany Nina on her visits of love before; but now she longed to see the result of Christian worship in a Christian family; she longed to kneel in the family circle; to bow her head, while God's blessing was invoked upon the food of which they were to partake; and more than this, she desired to hear Nina's gentle foster-mother speak of those heavenly things which were a part of her very existence, but which seemed so vague and distant to the girl who was now trying to understand—trying to believe.

The boys, Ned and Neil Bruce, met the girls at the station with the carriage. Great, handsome fellows they had grown to be, with a suspicion of a future moustache upon their upper lips; and Nina, who had loved them, and romped with them all through their joyous child-life, felt an unaccountable reserve in their presence now. Perhaps something of this feeling came to them, as well; for Neil,

after he had caught her up in his arms, and had kissed her in the old, boyish fashion of their childhood, set her down, and gazed at her in surprise, while the red on his cheeks deepened to a painful intensity. Perhaps it was the stylish new suit, perhaps it was that undefined something, which has power, in a few weeks, to change a merry girl into a woman. At any rate, they all recognized the change, with a deep sense of disappointment.

"I don't see how you dared to kiss Nina in that way," remarked Ned, as he came forward, and gave her a bashful welcome, which was just as warm and affectionate as his brother's had been.

"I don't think I would have dared, if I had stopped to look at her first," Neil confessed, as he greeted "Miss Florence." "But you know that's the way we used to kiss our little sister."

"Oh, dear!" sighed Nina, dolefully; "why need children grow up?"

And the boys' hearts echoed the sentiment, though they both secretly confessed that "Nina was a sight prettier than ever in her childhood."

"Two big satchels," said Ned, as he bore them triumphantly to the carriage. "What a sight of clothes it takes to supply a girl!"

"The satchels are full of Christmas presents for your ungrateful self and family," said Florence, laughing.

“Oh! I beg pardon,” replied Ned, humbly. “Isn’t there another somewhere?”

“No, that is all.”

Papa and Mamma Bruce welcomed the girls with open arms and affectionate kisses; and, if the kisses on Nina’s lips were a trifle tenderer, and the arms clasped about Nina a bit more loving in their pressure, they were careful that Florence should not perceive it.

They had not been in the Bruce home an hour till Florence confided to Nina that she just loved Mrs. Bruce, and if God had given her such a mother, when her own died, she would have been a better girl.

“You are a dear, good girl, as it is, Florrie,” replied Nina; “and you grow better and dearer every day.”

Three happy, joyous days were spent at Live Oaks, during which they almost forgot the shadow resting on their home; and then, amid kisses and regrets, and a few tears from feminine eyes, which the stronger masculine nature failed to exhibit, and, accordingly, winked back to their proper place, the two girls returned to the city, in order to be ready to resume their studies.

Florence had found all she had hoped to find in that Christian home. She discovered the real source of their content and happiness. She felt that, even if there were no hereafter, the Christian receives abundant reward for his faith in the blessings it showers upon him here.

CHAPTER XI.

COLONEL CHESTER'S ILLNESS.

THE day before New Years, Colonel Chester returned home. He had completed his business arrangements with the man he had gone to meet; but the result was far from satisfactory. He smiled with his "young people," and endeavored to become interested in their affairs, as formerly; but his efforts were miserable failures.

On New Year's Day, while they were all sitting around the fire, Colonel Chester said, with an effort to throw off all signs of depression on this first day of the year:

"I wrote a letter this morning, and forgot the new date. I wonder how many letters written to-day will have a six made over a five."

"Did you date your letter 1886, grandpapa?" asked Nina, with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes.

"To be sure I did—after I had first dated it 1885," he replied.

"Isn't it strange, grandpapa, how the whole world—unbelievers, as well as Christians—acknowledges the birth of our Saviour every time they write a letter?"

Then, without waiting for his reply, she continued:

"Rome, you know, was great in power, when that helpless little babe was born in Bethlehem, and they had already begun to reckon time. It was then the 747th year of Rome. Herod the Great was an important personage, and time was reckoned from his birth and reign. It was the 67th year of Herod the Great, and the 36th of his reign. Now it seems to me that the world—at least, those who do not believe in Christ as other than a good man—would prefer to date their letters, and reckon time, from a more important event than just the birth of a little child, who had only a manger for his cradle, and never, during the thirty-three sad years of his life, had a place to lay his head; who never became great in worldly power, or influential in a worldly sense, and who was finally crucified with two thieves."

Florence leaned forward, with parted lips.

"Oh, grandpapa!" cried Florence, in a sharp, clear voice, with the ring of conviction in it. "He was not a common man, else all these things would not be. See, we who have not believed in him, are obliged to acknowledge him every time we write a letter."

"You, too, Florence!" he replied, not angrily, but reproachfully, as he rose and walked out of the room.

"What is it?" he asked himself, when he was alone, "this influence, which is stronger than I? How came that girl by her superior knowledge of these things, at a

time when she should only know the proper shade of ribbons, and the most stylish drapings for her skirts? Why is it that the whole world has accepted this date? What is the meaning of these thoughts which crowd upon me? Can it be that, after a long life of confident assurance in the non-existence of God, and especially of Christ, as the Saviour of the world, and a divine being, a girl's puny hands are beating down the strong wall upon which my beliefs are founded? But, if this thing *is* of God—if he is what the Christian world believe him to be—then I am helpless in his hands, and this weak girl is stronger than I.

“I am not bigoted in my unbelief of these things. I have reached my conclusions after conscientious research and thought. To be sure, I have studied the works of man, rather than the so-called book of God; and I now acknowledge that I have erred in this. No man can judge correctly of a work until he becomes pretty conversant with that work. I am surprised to find how little I know of the Bible story, as it is recorded in Nina's book. I have, as yet, found no harm in it. Its teachings are pure, and the world cannot be wronged by it, if they accept its truths in a rational light, which a few of the Christian churches do. I find no quarreling and bickering over creeds and dogmas there. But I will try to forget all these, in my study of the Bible. I cannot

now be satisfied with anything short of a thorough knowledge of the Bible; and until I have gained this, I will have no further conversation with Nina on the subject."

The next week, Dyke departed for his distant school; the two girls resumed their interrupted studies, and life at Colonel Chester's passed much as it had done before, except that the Colonel seemed older and graver. Mrs. Randall had the appearance of one who was fighting a silent battle of remorse and sorrow; and the two girls were more thoughtful, more tenderly considerate of others. They noticed that, as the days wore on, Grandpapa Chester's step grew slow, and his movements seemed to cost him a great effort; that he ate but little food, and would sit for hours in silent meditation.

"He is fretting over that money," said Florence, one day. "Oh, I wish I could help him. It seems such a shame for us all to sit idly by, when he is struggling under this great burden alone."

Colonel Chester's affliction was bearing good fruit, in many ways. Our greatest blessings are born from our deepest afflictions. We should thank God for our sorrows, since they are as stepping-stones to the "glorious beyond."

Florence's worst fault was selfishness. Reared in luxury, with every wish gratified as soon as made known,

self had filled a prominent place in her life. She watched her grandfather's anxiety, and her whole heart went out to him in generous impulse, with longing to lift a part of his burden, and help him to bear it.

Near the last of January, Colonel Chester informed his family that it would again be necessary for him to be absent from home for several days. Once more he departed for the western part of the State; and again a sense of loneliness settled upon the entire household.

He had been gone but three days, when the first of a series of calamities visited the family. Mrs. Randall, in stepping from the carriage, sprained her ankle, seriously; so much so, that she was confined to her couch, and unable to use her foot, in the least.

The next morning, while she was still suffering greatly with the sprain, just after the doctor had suggested the possibility of erysipelas "setting in," Aunt Dinah, who seemed to be the "main stay" of the family in their distress, informed them that "Jake don' fitch me wo'd 'at my olest chile, Liz'e Ann, am berry sick wid hydrostatics of de spinal column. Her as was married las' spring; an' her ole mammy mus' go to her in her 'fiction."

Of course they could not deny the old woman's request, especially as her daughter was suffering with such an unusual disease.

"I'se berry worried 'bout de house, an' Miss Mary, an'

my gal what I used to tote in these ole arms, un' Is'e nearly constructed in de duties a pullin' as on all sides ob me to onct," she said, with tears of anxiety in her eyes.

"Don't fret about us, aunty," said Florence, cheerfully. "We shall get along nicely, I assure you."

"Yes," chimed in Nina, re-assuringly. "I will look after the kitchen and household affairs, and Florence can nurse Aunt Mary."

And so, with many dubious shakes of her turbaned head, Aunt Dinah departed; leaving the two girls in charge of the great house, and Aunt Mary's swollen ankle. Florence bathed the ankle, and combed Aunt Mary's long brown hair, with gentle touches, and prepared dainty little dishes for her, in the kitchen, assisted by Nina's superior knowledge of cookery. Indeed, she made herself so useful and lovable that she bore but a shadowy resemblance to the girl who was called by her name a few months before. Nina ruled the kitchen, dusted the parlor, bought the vegetables, and proved to be quite as efficient, in her department, as Florence in hers.

They were both very tired and very busy, and right in the midst of it all came a person saying that a gentleman at Lester, through which he had passed the night before, finding that he was on his way to San Antonio,

had begged him to deliver a message at Colonel Chester's home.

Colonel Chester was ill, dangerously ill, in that desolate Western station. A few rooms in the depot and a few tents, comprised the lodging places of the town. No nurse, or practicing physician was within many miles.

"The gentleman who wished me to deliver the message," continued the stranger, "said that he had practiced medicine years ago, and that he would do all that loving care and his medical knowledge could effect until some one arrived to attend the sick man, who was much too ill to be moved at present. He hinted at the possibility of small-pox. He said the symptoms were similar."

When the gentleman, having delivered his message, went away, the two girls stood quite still, regarding each other with startled glances.

"What shall we do?" they asked, in a breath; and carried the question to Aunt Mary for an answer.

"Poor grandpapa," sobbed Florence; "sick, in trouble, and away from home and home comforts."

"I cannot go to him," said Aunt Mary, looking at her helpless limb woefully. "Aunt Dinah cannot go; and I think there is nothing else to be done but to send some hired nurse to him."

"Aunt Mary," said Nina, bravely, "we will do nothing of the kind. Grandpapa is too precious to all of us to

turn him over in his helplessness to a stranger. I will go to him."

"You, child, are you crazy?" exclaimed Aunt Mary, in consternation.

"No," said Nina, decidedly. "I was never more rational in my life. Oh, how I thank God for those years spent with papa and mamma Bruce in Michigan! I learned then to cook, to sew, to nurse in sickness, and to do a hundred helpful things which will be of use to me in that lonely place where grandpapa is sick."

"But, Nina, I cannot think of permitting you, a young girl, to go away out there alone. It would be most imprudent. Is there no one, no gentleman friend of Andrew's, who will accompany you?"

"Possibly; but I have no time in which to seek him out. Every moment is precious now. I must take this evening's train. You must let me go, Aunt Mary," she said gently, but firmly. "The God in whom I trust will watch over me, and will shield me from all harm."

Looking at her, as she stood there with her brave resolve shining in her clear eyes, and wrapped in the womanly dignity which her new responsibility had cast about her, Aunt Mary decided that Nina should go, as she desired.

The remainder of the day was spent in preparations for Nina's departure. A hamper of delicacies, which she

hoped grandpapa might be able to eat, was prepared by Florence's loving hand. Many things needful in a sick room were packed into Nina's small trunk.

Aunt Mary made suggestions and advised, while the two girls worked.

"Oh, Nina, Nina, if it should be the small-pox!" cried Florence, in distress, as she clung to her cousin, when they were seated in the carriage and driven, by Jake, to the station. Florence felt that she could not bear to lose sight of Nina for one moment until the train bore her away. "Dearly as I love grandpapa, and willing as I would be to do anything for him, I am afraid I would not dare to go where there is danger of death. Oh, Nina, I am so afraid of death and the beyond."

"I have not even thought of that," said Nina, calmly; "but I am not afraid, Flossie. If I must die now, I can trust the future in the hands of him who first gave me the breath of life."

"It seems so selfish for me to stay here in safety, while you are going into danger. I almost hate myself for my cowardice," said Florence.

"You could do him no good by going," replied Nina, persuasively, "and you are needed here. It will be very hard for you until Aunt Dinah returns; and you have never been accustomed to any responsibility."

"I will do my best," said Florence, earnestly.

"That is all God requires of any one; and if you ask him to help you, you will find that your best is better than you thought possible," said Nina.

"I will. Oh, Nina, I did ask him to-day to save grandpapa. But I felt like a stranger, and I am not sure that he heard me; but I was in such trouble."

"Keep asking him, Florrie, often in the day, and you will be surprised how very soon you will feel acquainted with him, and how light your burdens will become."

Jake threw open the carriage door at that moment. Then followed the confusion of buying tickets, and good-bye kisses, mingled with tears. Then came the motion of the train, as Nina rode away alone into the far Texas wilderness.

The lonely girl longed to question the conductor in regard to grandpapa and Lester; but he had an unpleasant face, and she did not dare. Then the thought came to her that this was the train on which Ned had once been brakeman. If only he were here now, what a comfort and consolation it would be to her! She would not then be so lonely at Lester, while grandpapa was sick, because every day or two Ned's train would pass, and she would have a few moments to chat with him; and if she needed things in the city for grandpapa's comfort, Ned would bring them to her when he came; but Ned was no longer on the road, and the trainmen were all strangers to her.

Thinking of Ned, and the comfort his presence would have given her at this time, caused her to scan closely the face of the brakeman who was occupying Ned's place. He had such a bright, young face, and looked so kindly disposed, that she felt she might safely tell him her trouble. When she had broached the subject to him, he talked with her so sympathetically and kindly that she felt less lonely. He offered to do any errand she might desire in the city, while she remained at Lester.

"It is terrible to be sick in such an out-of-the-way place as Lester; and it seems to me you will hardly be equal to the hardships you will meet with there," he said, gazing at the slender girl compassionately.

"I must be brave, and strong, for dear grandpapa's sake," she replied, with a slight quiver in her voice.

All night Nina rode westward; and in the early morning, her new friend, the brakeman, came to assist her to alight.

It seemed to her that she had never seen anything so desolate as that landscape of rocks—gray, barren rocks, and reaching on, in rugged desolation, as far as she could see. Not even a yucca (Spanish dagger), or a cactus plant, to relieve the monotony of the scene. The only objects which broke the wide expanse of dreary rocks, were a few gray tents, and a gray depot. Everything, even the overhanging sky, was of the same dull gray.

There were a few men at the station, who seemed to be gathered there to glean items of news from the world beyond. The advent of the train was the one exciting event in their isolated existence.

Among these faces, Nina saw one which looked strangely familiar, and yet she could not remember having seen it before.

There was something almost pathetic in the eager intensity with which this person scanned the faces of those getting off from the cars. A cloud of disappointment settled over his countenance, when those who intended to stop for lunch had all stepped down; and Nina involuntarily turned, and looked at him again, the face seemed so familiar.

"Can you tell this young lady where she can find the gentleman who was taken sick here a day or two ago?" asked the brakeman, addressing this gentleman.

"Certainly. I was in hopes that his friends would come on this train; but I thought—that is, I expected—it would be his sister, Mrs. Randall"—he replied, taking Nina's basket from the brakeman's hands, and leading the way to a small, dingy room in the station.

"Aunt Mary has sprained her ankle, and could not come," replied Nina, modestly. "Some one had to come; and I am the only one, aside from Aunt Mary, who understands all about hardships."

The man winced, as if in pain ; but Nina's thoughts were too intent on Grandpapa Chester to notice it.

"Have you been with him all the while?" she asked, when he had ushered her into the room she was to occupy while she remained at Lester.

"Yes ; all the while."

She lifted her eyes to his face in a searching glance. It was a strong, true face, shadowed by sorrow ; and she felt at once that she could trust him.

Placing her hands in his, with a sweet, girlish impulse, she said, entreatingly :

"And you will not leave me, will you? You will stay, and help me care for him?"

"I will, my child," he said, solemnly. "Together we will save him, if possible. He is a very sick man ; but you and I will fight for his life."

"Oh ! thank you ! I cannot repay you now for your kindness ; but some time, perhaps, I may."

He bent his head, with its many threads of silver in the dark hair, and touched his lips to her soft, childish hand.

"When you are ready, I will take you down to breakfast, such as it is," he said. "After which, I will take you to Colonel Chester's room."

"I couldn't eat a mouthful of breakfast," she said, tremulously.

"But you must," he replied, with firm decision. "I am a physician, and you must obey me, or I cannot permit you to enter the sick-room. I shall go with you, and you must eat all I think necessary before you can visit him."

"I don't see how I can; but I will try," she said.

There was strength for the weak girl in the man's gentle authority, a magnetic influence in his very presence, which seemed to inspire her with courage; and she was surprised to find that she could eat, and that she even relished the coarse food set before her.

"He will not recognize you," said her companion, on opening the door to the sick-room.

"Has he—is it——?" The question trembled on her lips, but the voice broke down before she spoke it. He understood it, however, and replied, re-assuringly:

"It is typhoid-fever, brought on, I think, by some mental anxiety."

"It was the money that was stolen from him on Christmas night," she said, meditatively.

"On Christmas night?" he asked, quickly. He had glanced into the sick-room, and, seeing that his patient slept, had softly closed the door again, that the sound of their voices might not disturb him. "Does he know anything about the robbers?"

Nina, thinking that he was the gentleman whom her

grandfather had come to see on business, and hoping that, if he knew the whole circumstance, he might be more willing to pay her grandfather a fair price for the property he was about to purchase of him, decided to tell him all.

"There was only one that we saw," she said; "a man with wild eyes and a white face. Florence and I were walking in the grounds that night, and we saw him down by the live oak tree.

"Do you know, I never think of him but that I am sorry for him?" she added, earnestly. "I know that he took the fifteen thousand dollars from dear grandpapa that night—the money he held in trust for his dead friend's children; that all the worry which has come to us since has been through him, and that grandpapa's sickness was brought about by that man; and I try to harden my heart against him, and to think that he deserves the worst kind of punishment; but, somehow, in spite of myself, I pity him."

"God bless you for your loving heart," said the man, unsteadily. And Nina wondered how he, a stranger, was so deeply affected by her story.

"Does Colonel Chester think the man who robbed him, and the one you saw by the live oak, are the same?"

"Oh, yes, indeed; for why was he there, if he did not know that grandpapa had the money that night? We all knew he took the money; and Dyke—Aunt Mary's

boy—said he hoped the officers would catch him—(the man drew a quick breath)—“but I don’t; only I do wish he would send back at least a part of it. He might do that.”

“Yes, if he had it. I am quite sure if, in a moment of despair or frenzy, he had taken it, he would have returned it all in his first rational moment.”

“I believe so too,” said Nina, quickly; “and I think Aunt Mary had some such thought. She did not say much on the subject; but, oh, she grew so white when I described how wretched the man looked. I am sure, quite sure, she is sorry for him.”

Her companion rose and walked with quick, impatient steps up and down the hall. Pausing beside her, he asked:

“Did she think that he took the money?”

“Yes; we all knew it. Grandpapa and Aunt Mary talked it over by themselves; and when they came out of the room, he had a stern look on his face, and she had been crying. I think that she persuaded him not to arrest the robber, because there was nothing more said about it afterward.”

CHAPTER XII.

NURSE AND HOUSEKEEPER.

WEARY, tedious days were spent in the sick-room, while a strong man and a frail girl fought back death, each forgetting self in their labor of love.

Once, when Nina was about addressing her new friend, and hesitated because she did not know his name, he said :

“My name is Gordon. You may call me Dr. Gordon, if you like.”

“He was her only companion, and was as tenderly thoughtful of her as a father might have been. She walked in the open air, ate, and slept, by his directions. She told him of home and Florence, Aunt Mary and Dyke, and he seemed never weary of listening to her. Especially was he interested when she opened her heart to him, and confided to him her deep anxiety concerning Grandpapa Chester’s unbelief.

“We must not let him die now. *We must not*”—she said, with tearful eyes. “I cannot let my darling grandpapa go out of life until he believes in my Saviour. I have not dared to ask God to make him well again, be-

cause there is something so much more important than life. I have only asked him to convert him, and to save his soul."

One evening, Nina had been reading to Dr. Gordon Florence's last letter, in which she had written of a low fever which seemed to have attacked Aunt Mary.

"She is not very ill," Florence wrote; "only so weak. She keeps her bed most of the time; and, Nina, dear, we are reading the Bible story together; or, rather, I read, while Aunt Mary listens, with tears in her eyes. I think we are both beginning to love the dear Saviour who died for us."

"God is good—better than I deserve. His plans are full of wisdom—beyond man's comprehension," said Dr. Gordon, fervently.

Nina looked up in amazement that he should take such an interest in her dear ones. But, before she could speak, he continued:

"Dear child, you cannot think or imagine how low I have fallen. Do you know what it means to be a drunkard? Oh, thank heaven, you do not know. I was once all that the word can possibly mean, and I tried so many times to break the chains which bound me—tried and failed. Rum had sapped away my moral strength, had weakened my intellect; shattered my nervous system; and I no longer had the power to conquer the fatal ap-

petite which was dragging me down to eternal ruin. It was then I called upon God, and he heard me. It was his mercy ; his strength that saved me. Without him I am weaker than a child to resist temptation ; with him I am strong as a giant."

"I am so glad that you are a Christian," said Nina, simply. "I always feel that those who love my Saviour are relatives of mine."

"We are all children of one Father," he replied.

After this conversation they sometimes read the Bible together. One day, when Nina was putting the room to rights, Grandpapa Chester's coat fell from her hands to the floor, and something, a small, dark object, dropped from one of the pockets.

She picked it up with a glad, little cry of delight. It was her own Bible—the one that good Elder Williams had given her, and which she had lamented as lost forever. She thought it had been destroyed weeks before.

Why had he not destroyed, it as he had threatened? Why had he carried it with him? These were questions the answers to which she anticipated with great satisfaction.

"Your cheeks are losing their roses, dear," said Dr. Gordon, one morning, when Nina had been at Lester several days. "This will never do. You must keep your roses, in order to brighten up grandpapa's sick

room. I think he will soon be able to recognize his little nurse."

"Oh, doctor, is he really better?"

"The fever is subsiding, and I shall not be surprised if, when he wakens again, he knows you."

"How happy I shall be to have him know me again. But, Dr. Gordon——" Nina's face grew thoughtful.

"What is it, dear?"

"The food is so poorly cooked. I am myself almost starved for want of something palatable. What will grandpapa do, when he can eat?"

"I have been thinking of that myself," said Dr. Gordon. "If you could cook——"

"But I can," she interrupted him to say. "If I only had a place and a few cooking utensils. Oh, I wish I had."

"I think I can arrange those things if you understand how to use them," he said, with a smile.

"Just try me and see if we do not all improve on the good things I will prepare," said Nina, brightly.

"Your little room, just across the hall, will answer nicely for a kitchen. Your small bed occupies but a little space," said Dr. Gordon, "and I will send at once to the city for an oil-stove and a few dishes. I am sure I shall have no trouble in obtaining permission of Mr. Brown for this arrangement, and I will nurse our invalid while you prepare dainty morsels of food to tempt his ap-

petite and our own. We can make a little dining-room of this end of the hall, between the two rooms. The window will give us sufficient light, and a curtain strung across will partition our apartments off from the rest of the house. Don't you see how nicely we are fixed for housekeeping?"

"It will be just like a play-house," exclaimed Nina, delightedly. "We will have it all arranged, and as cosy as can be by the time grandpapa can come to the table with us."

As Dr. Gordon had expected, when that long, sweet sleep of Colonel Chester's was over, he looked up into Nina's anxious face with his old smile. Feebly his hand moved toward hers, and clasping it lovingly, he drew the fair, young face down and kissed it.

"I dreamed you were with me, Nina; only I thought I was a boy again, and you were my playmate, Nina"—he said, fondly. "The sweet girl Nina who afterward became my wife, and whom you so closely resemble."

Then, comprehending his environments more fully, he asked, in surprise:

"But how happens it that you are here, so many miles from home, and alone? Are you alone, Nina, or is Mary here also?"

"I came alone, grandpapa, dear, and you will think me quite a little woman, I am sure, when I tell you how

nicely I managed it all. But I could not have done so well only that God"—— She paused apprehensively. She did not wish to pain him with that unpleasant topic the moment he recognized her. The name had sprung to her lips unconsciously.

"Say it again, Nina," he said, faintly, while tears of physical weakness and remorse for a misspent life filled his eyes. "Talk it to me, sing it to me, pray for me, oh, my pure little Nina. He will listen to you, child. You have not sinned a long life time against his merciful love. Down in the valley of death, I realized my mistake. There my stubborn will was broken; then my eyes were opened. It was then I discovered that too late I believed in your God and your Saviour."

"Yours too, grandpapa dear," whispered Nina, laying her moist, pink cheek against his own.

"There must be no more talking at present, unless you wish to do him harm," said a pleasant voice. "I am your physician, Colonel Chester, and forbid it."

He laid his hand, soft and gentle as a woman's in its touch, on his patient's forehead, felt his pulse, then added:

"But Nina may sing to you, if you like."

Nina, drawing her little rocker near the bed, sat down, and sang, in a low, sweet voice, to him who was coming back from the border-land of death—coming back to a new life in Christ. Weak as a child, ignorant of that

new life as a child, he had much to learn; and feeling that all future time would be too short in which to atone for the misspent past, he was, like a child, eager to improve every moment of it.

The songs he had once delighted in would have irritated him at that moment when his heart was reaching out after divine things. Nina recognized his desire, and the words which she sang were suited to his needs.

With her head resting on the high back of the rocker, with her hands clasped in her lap, and her eyes gazing out of the open window to the gray sky and the blue line of distant mountains, Nina sang:

Jesus, lover of my soul,
Let me to thy bosom fly.

There was something in her attitude—the clasped hands, the serene beauty of her face in its girlish loveliness, with its crown of golden hair—that called to the sick man's mind the fair, girl-mother of the holy babe, whose cradle was a manger. How he had scoffed at that story; impossible it had once seemed; but the eye of faith now saw nothing improbable in the story of our Saviour's birth. God, who had created the world, could change the laws of that creation, if he chose.

Without a pause, when the hymn was finished, Nina's voice passed from the glad assurance of that acknowl-

edgment of divine strength, to the triumphant beauty of those soul-inspiring words:

Bring forth the royal diadem,
And crown him Lord of all.

Then low, and sweet as summer's balmiest breezes, came the tender, touching melody, thrilled with reverential love:

I love to tell the story.

And when the last note trembled and died away on the air, she paused, thinking that the glad thanksgiving of her heart had tired him.

"It is like a foretaste of heaven, darling," he said. "How much I have missed in life! I think I can sleep again, now."

Nina drew the curtains over the window, smoothed his pillow, and quietly followed Dr. Gordon into the hall.

"Oh, Dr. Gordon, I am almost too happy to live," she cried, clasping her hands over her heart. "My heart aches with its joy. God has answered my prayer, and I am ashamed, when I remember that I had so little faith when I prayed for grandpapa's conversion. Oh, I must go and thank him."

"The dear child," thought Dr. Gordon, when she had entered her little room, and had closed the door between them. "She has been thanking God every moment,

since she learned the 'glad tidings.' Oh, for such faith as hers. I do not wonder that answers to her prayers come direct from the Father."

The next day, Colonel Chester was so much better and stronger in every way, that Dr. Gordon said he gained strength like a young man.

"The object of my sickness has been accomplished," he said, with a smile, "and now that God needs my strength it will be restored to me."

"I have something more palatable than beef-tea for your dinner," said Nina, approaching the bed with a tray, from which arose the faint aroma of appetizing food.

"It won't harm you in the least. Dr. Gordon said so," she explained, in answer to his look of inquiry.

"I was not thinking of that," he replied, as she put the first morsel between his lips. "I was wondering what spell of enchantment is upon the place. The food prepared here, before I was too sick to eat, was nauseating in the extreme, and this is simply delicious."

"The good fairy is feeding you at this moment," said Dr. Gordon, laughing. "She has just been trying the new oil stove, that reached us, not an hour ago."

"You don't mean to say that Nina prepared my dinner?" asked Colonel Chester.

"Yes, I do. She is a real treasure. You have no idea how useful she is," replied Dr. Gordon.

"But I never could have done it, if it had not been for Dr. Gordon," said Nina, quickly. "He suggested the oil-stove, and the dining-room. Oh, grandpapa, you would have died, if it had not been for his care."

"It was God's purpose that I should be with you at this time," said Dr. Gordon, calmly. "It was by mere accident that I was delayed at this place the day you were taken sick. We cannot understand 'God's ways,' but we know that they are for our good; and I believe that his wisdom in detaining me here will reveal itself in the happiness of all concerned."

"I thought you were the physician of this place," said Colonel Chester, "whom Nina had employed to attend me; but I remember that there is no resident physician here."

"I have not practiced medicine for some time," returned the doctor, "but I do not think your case could have been better handled."

"I am sure not," said Colonel Chester, gratefully. "You have been a friend in need, and I shall not forget it."

Later in the day, while Nina sat reading to Grandpapa Chester from the little Bible Elder Williams had given her, Dr. Gordon entered the room, bearing a small, mysterious bundle in his arms. The bundle gave unmistakable evidence of life; and Nina asked, curiously:

“What have you there, Dr. Gordon?”

“Something for you, if you care to keep it, and if Grandpapa Chester does not object,” he replied, with a smile. “Something to cheer up your loneliness while here.”

He laid the bundle on her lap, and when she had assisted the squirming atom to liberate itself from the blanket which enveloped it, a tiny Mexican dog bounced up, put both forepaws on her shoulder, and kissed her most affectionately.

“Oh, you darling little beauty!” she exclaimed, rapturously. “Where did you get him, Dr. Gordon? How old is he? What is his name? And, oh, are you sure that I may keep him? See, he loves me already.”

“He is nobody’s dog, unless you choose to adopt him,” replied Dr. Gordon. “He is a fine dog, and a valuable one; but the people here do not care for fine dogs. It has been more than two weeks since he was lost from one of the trains going West. I have had an eye on him ever since; and to-day, the telegraph operator said he wished I would take the little fellow, because he is far too sensative for the ill-usage of common dogs; and as no one has telegraphed for him by this time, he is at liberty to dispose of him, in any way he chooses.”

“Adopt him! indeed I will, if grandpapa does not object. See his eyes twinkle just like stars; and look at

his shaggy coat of black and white. His ears are like the softest of silk. Oh, grandpapa!"

She glanced up wistfully, and, at the same time, hugged the "wee doggie" in her arms.

"Do you think I could refuse you anything when you say 'Oh, grandpapa!' in that way?" he asked, fondly.

"I knew you would let me keep him. Why, he is a perfect prince among dogs."

At the word prince, the little dog pricked up his ears, and gave a quick, joyful bark, as though the name was not altogether strange.

"I believe it is his name," said Nina. "And it just suits him. So I will call him Prince. Now, when I take my 'medicine walk' in the mornings, I shall have company. Oh, Prince! such romps as we shall have among these gray old rocks!"

From that time forth, little Prince and Nina were inseparable; and in a short time he became as great a pet with Colonel Chester as with his granddaughter.

The old man watched the young girl with fond glance, as she moved about the room, putting it to rights, or devising new schemes for his comfort. He had loved her before; her face always reminded him of that dear face which for years had formed a part of his very life—the face of his wife, Nina's grandmother; but during those days of convalescence, when he looked into those sweet

eyes, filled with thoughtful tenderness, and anxious solicitude, it seemed to him he possessed in her a treasure beyond comparison.

Just at this time, there came a letter from his sister, Mrs. Randall—the first she had been able to write since her illness. The sight of her handwriting gave him great satisfaction and happiness.

Dr. Gordon was with them, as usual, when the letter arrived, and Nina drew it from its envelope to read it aloud to her grandfather. He rose to leave the room, but Colonel Chester motioned him to resume his seat.

“Do not go, Dr. Gordon,” he said. “You are one of us, and I am sure you will be pleased to hear from our home, of which we have so often told you. You seem quite like a son to me. I am certain I could not have loved my own boys more, had it pleased God to spare their lives to comfort my old age.”

“Thank you, Colonel Chester,” replied Dr. Gordon, feelingly. “Your words afford me the greatest pleasure. I assure you that there is but one other on earth whose good opinion I value more than yours.”

“You have mine, at any rate,” returned Colonel Chester, with a smile; “and when I return home, I shall want you to accompany me, and form the acquaintance of the rest of my family.”

“That will hardly be possible, as I shall be obliged to

go to El Paso when you no longer need me," he said, almost sadly.

"True. I seemed to have forgotten that you have other ties in life, and that you do not in reality belong to us. I have never heard you speak of your home; whereas Nina and I have continually rung the praises of ours in your ears."

"And, I assure you, you could not choose a more agreeable topic," replied Dr. Gordon, sincerely. "I hope, some time, to visit your home."

"Just as soon as ever the business in El Paso is completed?" said Nina, entreatingly. "I know that Aunt Mary and Florence will be so anxious to make your acquaintance, when we have told them all that you have been to us. I have written about you; but I have not told them half of your kindness."

"You overestimate it, Nina; and you will lead them to expect a paragon. I shall scarcely dare to come at all, if you lead them to expect so much; for I know they will be disappointed," he said, a shadow deepening in his eyes as he spoke.

She shook her head merrily, flashed a confident glance at him, and drew Aunt Mary's letter from its envelope.

"I am so glad that Aunt Mary is getting better," she said, as she unfolded the letter. "All of our good things are coming at once, just as all of our disasters did."

CHAPTER XII.

DR. GORDON'S SECRET.

“**I** AM feeling much stronger to-day,” Aunt Mary’s letter began, “and I am going to use my first strength in writing to you. I know, from Nina’s sprightly letters home, that Richard’s daughter is proving herself to be a dear little woman, and is justifying all our best anticipations of her. In fact, I expected much from Nina—but Florence! Oh, brother Andrew! you do not know what a jewel you have in her. She is a perfect contradiction of her former self, a noble girl whom you will be proud to own——”

“Read that over, Nina,” exclaimed Colonel Chester, interrupting her. “She must be mistaken in Florrie. Why, the child never gave a thought to any one’s comfort but her own. What can Mary mean?”

“I am sure she means all that her words imply,” said Nina, quickly. “Florrie was so gentle and helpful before I came away. Oh, grandpapa! the love of God sweeps all the accumulations of selfishness and slothfulness from the human heart.”

“But what does Florrie know of God?” he ques-

tioned, in amazement. "The thought has lain very heavy on my heart during the last few days, that my sin in refusing to acknowledge my Maker would injure her."

"Grandpapa, you forget that he who kept you from destroying my little Bible, and made it a blessing to you, can also bring others to himself," said Nina. "That day, when we had our reading, and I was feeling so badly over the result of it, not knowing that those results would be greater than I dared to hope for, Aunt Mary and Florence both decided to get Bibles of their own, and read the story for themselves."

"And did they?" asked Colonel Chester.

"Yes, they each bought a Bible in secret, and read them in secret. But our afflictions have drawn us all closer together; and Florrie confessed this to me before I came away; and has written since, that she and Aunt Mary are reading the Bible story together."

"Strange that any one can doubt the miracles Christ performed while on earth, when he is daily performing as great ones in our midst," said Colonel Chester, solemnly. "He raised the dead to life then, and he has done the same for me. I was dead, and he said 'Live.' And now I live in him. Not only this, but every circumstance of my life is viewed in a different light now. My sickness, which would once have seemed a great calamity, has proved to be a blessing to all of us. I do not regret

the loss of my money as I did before, since all these things might not have happened but for that. Fifteen thousand dollars is not a great price to pay for the peace and happiness which fills my soul to-day. I only regret the manner in which it was lost, and I cannot now see how God will lift that shadow from our hearts; but I have faith to believe that he will do so."

Colonel Chester seemed to have forgotten the presence of others in his low-spoken meditations. He forgot that a stranger was present; and that Nina did not know whom he suspected of that robbery.

"But read the rest of Aunt Mary's letter, dear," he continued, arousing from his reverie.

"She has developed into a sweet, capable woman," Aunt Mary's letter continued. "She stepped into Nina's place as naturally as though it cost her no effort to do so; and yet, I know, that it was far more difficult for her than for Nina, who has been accustomed to those things. Nina wrote home the glad tidings of your new-found joy, Andrew, or I would not write these things to you; but, it seems that God's Spirit has been working within us all at the same time. It is this which assists Florence in her hard task. Faith in God seems to have purified her heart, sweetened her disposition, and made her a gentle, tender, thoughtful girl, whom you will love more than ever."

"And to think that I have blindly fought against my own best happiness and hers, all these years," said Colonel Chester, unsteadily, while the tears chased each other down his cheeks. "If it takes all I am worth to make good my loss, I shall not be unhappy with two such loving girls to brighten up my home for me."

"If it were not for the shadow on my heart," Nina read from the letter, "I could be very happy. Oh, brother, I long for your return, because I believe your suspicions are unjust. The more I think of that night, the more certain I am of this."

"What does she mean, grandpapa?" asked Nina, looking up from the letter, inquiringly.

"Never mind, dear. I do not think she meant you to read her letter; so you may hand it to me."

She handed him the letter, and, turning to leave the room, in order to attend to some household cares, her eyes met Dr. Gordon's; and again that strange feeling, which had come to her when she stepped off from the cars at Lester, swept over her.

"Dr. Gordon," she said, in a low, earnest voice, "where have I seen you before?"

Colonel Chester was intent on reading his letter, and did not hear her question, or see him motion her into the hall.

"Sometimes," said Nina, when they were alone, "you

have a strange look on your face, and then it seems to me that I must have seen you somewhere, before I met you here."

"Nina," he said, "I am in great trouble. I do not know that you can help me; but I am strangely impressed to tell you about myself. Do you think you can keep my secret, if it is necessary?"

"Yes, I can," replied Nina, earnestly; "and if I can help you in any way, I shall be glad to do it."

"Perhaps it is useless," he replied, thoughtfully. Then, after a moment's silent thought, he added:

"I have told you something about my past life, Nina. That I was a drunkard. And of all wretched, despicable beings on earth, a helpless, hopeless drunkard is the most degraded. He feels his degradation, but is helpless to better his condition; and, unless God interferes for his safety, he is lost. But sometimes, as in my own case, God's very interference is a terrible blow. Desperate cases require severe remedies, and I—oh, Nina, child, you will not hate me when I tell you that I did not reform until I had first been the means of blighting my home, breaking my wife's heart, and causing the death of the fairest little blossom that ever blessed a home with its sweet presence? Do you know your Aunt Mary's story, Nina?" he asked.

"Yes," she faltered, "and it is a sad one."

Then you know *my* story," he resumed. "I think you must have seen some resemblance to me in Dyke's face."

"Oh, you do not mean to tell me that you are Dyke's father—Aunt Mary's husband?"—she cried, quickly.

"Hush!" he said, cautioning her, "or he will hear you. And I do not want him to know yet."

"You are, indeed," she said, assuredly. "And you will go home with us, and Aunt Mary will be so proud of you."

"I am not so sure of that," he said, with a wan smile. "I have done nothing in my life to merit her esteem. But much, oh, so much to destroy it. I would not have told you this; but something inspires me with a hope that if she knew where I am, she might send me one word of remembrance."

"I will tell her," exclaimed Nina. "And I know that she will send for you."

"No, child, do not misunderstand me," he said, firmly. "I could not go to her now, if she should send for me. It may be that I can never go to her. There is something you do not understand, which may be the means of separating us forever; but if I could know that she does not utterly despise me, I could, at least, endure my exile. Because you have learned to love me, and because you have seen in me something a little better than she thought me capable of ever becoming, I have decided to let you

plead my cause with her. But remember to tell her that I do not do this with a hope of returning to her again. Tell her that I said it could never be until the shadow—she will understand—is lifted from my name, which will be in God's own time—for I am not guilty.”

“If only grandpapa knew. I know he could help you. He is so fond of you,” began Nina. But he interrupted her with :

“No, he must not suspect my identity. I should be very sorry to have it happen. You are sure you can keep my secret, Nina?” he asked, gravely.

“Yes, sir, if you desire it.”

“There is one thing I wish to explain,” he added. “I told you that my name is Gordon, and you might address me as Dr. Gordon. The name is my own, and, as such, I have a right to use it. My full name is Joseph Gordon Randall. Colonel Chester had good reasons for disliking me, on account of my treatment of his sister, and I did not care that he, or you, should recognize me until I had made a better record for myself than that by which I was known.”

“Surely you may tell him now,” said Nina, in a pleading tone.

“I might, only that something has happened since ; or rather, I have learned something, which prevents my doing so. No, Nina, I cannot reveal myself to him ; and

I suppose the brave way—perhaps the better way—would have been to have gone away in silence. I had fully intended doing so until I heard your aunt's letter; but something in it bids me hope that she will be glad to hear from me, and to know that I am trying to build a new manhood out of the wreck of the old."

"I will tell her all I know about you, and I know only what is good," said Nina. And her busy brain began to plan how she would tell Aunt Mary of his kindness, his tenderness, his loving care for her, and his love for God. How she would make Aunt Mary respect him before she told her who he was.

Nina went into her own little room, tied a large apron about her slender waist, lit the oil-stove, and began the preparation of their noon meal.

"Dear Florrie," she mused, between snatches of happy songs. "How much comfort we shall be to each other hereafter! Aunt Mary is right. Florrie deserves a great deal of credit for taking upon herself those unpleasant tasks so cheerfully. It must be a great trial for her to attend to all household matters, and superintend the cooking in the hot kitchen; and yet, Aunt Mary writes, that she does not complain. As for me, I delight in those things. I love to cook and sweep and dust; and there is no self-denial for me in it."

On leaving Nina, Dr. Gordon went for a walk; and,

returning before dinner was ready, went into Colonel Chester's room.

"You must excuse me, Dr. Gordon," began Colonel Chester, when he was seated, "for interrupting Nina and taking the letter from her. I was fearful that my sister was about to reveal a secret. Poor Mary!" he added, meditatively. "She has had a most unhappy life."

Dr. Gordon did not reply, and Colonel Chester continued:

"Nina has told you about the money stolen from me on Christmas night?"

"Yes, she said that she saw the man who robbed you near the live oak tree in the evening. Did you make an attempt to have him arrested?"

"Yes, but after I had talked the matter over with my sister, I withdrew my charge. I will tell *you*, though I do not want Nina to know; my sister knew the man, and for her sake I decided not to punish him."

"Is that right; is it just?" asked Dr. Gordon, with deep feeling. "You may have condemned an innocent man, and by your silence you place it beyond his power to prove his innocence. Why do you not arrest him, and let him tell his story?"

"Because I am certain of his guilt. I am somewhat acquainted with the history of the man I suspect. A man who would rob his wife and children, in order to

satisfy his thirst for strong drink, would not hesitate to steal from another, if an opportunity were offered."

Dr. Gordon's sensitive face flushed hotly.

"To arrest him would only make his guilt a public matter, whereas it is now known only to myself and my sister."

"But if he is guilty, he deserves this."

"It is not for his sake I hesitate, but for the sake of others. Innocent ones would then be obliged to bear the burden of his sin."

"On the other hand, if he is not guilty, you are doing him a great injustice, a great wrong," urged Dr. Gordon.

"But I tell you he is guilty. I am satisfied of this," replied Colonel Chester, with something of his old stubborn assurance in his tones. "I have no doubt whatever of his guilt, and I much prefer to suffer the loss—though I assure you it is no small matter at present—to making the affair public.

Dr. Gordon sighed, and Nina, coming in at that moment with the server, upon which Grandpapa Chester's food was laid in tempting array, with a bouquet of scarlet and yellow cactus blossoms, interrupted the conversation.

"The brakeman brought them to me," she said. "See this small one, like a pale, pink star, and these larger, more gorgeous blossoms. They are so beautiful—only one must admire them at a distance. They will not

allow themselves to be touched. He brought them in a basket, and told me that he would advise me to handle them with a fork ; which I did when I arranged them."

"They are very pretty," said Colonel Chester, "and seem doubly so in this desolate wilderness ; but they are also very treacherous, and you must be exceedingly careful, or you will have your fingers full of thistles."

"I shall guard against that"—and Nina laughed merrily, placing the tip of her nose as close to the flowers as prudence would admit. "Nothing but beauty, and that is guarded by thistles," she said, with disappointment. "They have no fragrance."

"Like many a beautiful face, which, lacking more desirable qualities of beauty in heart and mind, soon loses its attraction for us," said Dr. Gordon.

"They set the rugged old mountains all aflame with gorgeous tints ; but, like the mountains, are appreciated most when viewed at a respectful distance," said Nina, laughing. "I believe they breathe out thistles ; for see, I have one in my thumb, and I have been so careful not to touch them."

"I think I shall be able to go home soon, shall I not, doctor ?" Colonel Chester asked, after eating heartily of the food Nina had brought him.

Dr. Gordon smiled.

"Yes ; very soon, if your appetite continues good.

I think I never saw any one gain faster than you have."

"I want to be at home; but I don't see how I can ever reconcile myself to Aunt Dinah's cooking again, after this," said Colonel Chester, raising a spoonful of delicious "apple-float" to his lips.

"And you never shall, if you can persuade her to admit me to the kitchen each day, long enough to prepare some of these dainties with which to 'tickle your palate,'" replied Nina. "I don't believe that Aunt Dinah could learn to make 'angel's food.'"

"Is that what you have been feeding us?" asked Dr. Gordon. "I am not surprised that Colonel Chester relishes it, just coming back, as he is, from the borderland; but that a great, strong man, like myself, can thrive on such an ethereal mixture, is astonishing; and I do think, there's no mistake about it. I have gained several pounds since you put me on this celestial diet."

"Oh, but I have given you plenty of meat and potatoes, beside," returned Nina.

Later in the evening, when the tea things had been put away, and the room set in order for the night, and while—the evening being chilly—they were sitting around the fire in Colonel Chester's room, Nina asked:

"Grandpapa, at Christmas time, had you begun to be sorry that you had taken my Bible from me?"

"No, indeed. I felt, at that time, as if I would like to have you forget that you had ever read that Bible story. I had become so infatuated with the ideas of those who deride the Bible story, that I was grieved to think it had taken such a hold upon your imagination. I thought, at that time, that it was imagination more than real heart-worship; that your early education was wholly at fault. I soon learned my mistake, and discovered that I had a graver task on my hands than I anticipated; but not knowing of God, and the power of his love in the human heart, I then attributed your firmness to stubbornness. I now ask your forgiveness for all I made you suffer, Nina."

She sprang to his side, in her bright, impulsive way, and dropped her forgiveness in warm kisses upon his face.

"But I cannot understand it all," she said, emphatically.

"Understand what, dear?"

"Why, you remember, you gave me 'Ben Hur' for my Christmas?"

"Yes. I heard you express a wish for the book."

"And yet, you took away my Bible," said Nina. "Grandpapa," she added, "do you know what the story of 'Ben Hur' is?"

"No. I had no time to examine it; but I had sufficient confidence in you to believe that you would not

desire to read anything except good books. Aside from this, an acquaintance of mine remarked to me, that it was just the kind of book he would like his daughter to read."

"And you did not look at it? You did not know?" questioned Nina. "Don't you remember that, after you had given it to me, I got especial permission from you to read it?"

"Yes. I thought it was probably a novel of a high order, and that you were fearful I might not approve of it. What was the book about, Nina?"

"It, was as you say, a novel, grandpapa—a beautiful novel; but it was more than this, as you would have discovered if you had read so much as the title page. It is called 'A Tale of the Christ,' and contains beautiful descriptions of people and places."

"Nina," said Colonel Chester, gravely, "I did not know this. It was God's work, and not mine. He has been over-ruling the events of the past few weeks. I can see his power through it all. At the very time my rebellion against him was at its height, he made use of me to accomplish his work, and advance his cause."

CHAPTER XIV.

WHAT FLORENCE FOUND.

A YOUNG girl, with a large apron tied about her slim waist, was dusting the parlors at the Chester homestead. Her pretty face had a tired look, and her blue eyes were heavy with unshed tears.

"I don't see how I ever lived all these years without Nina," she mused, throwing open the window, to let in the balmy fragrance of the sweet spring air. It lifted her yellow hair, and tossed it back from her tired, flushed face. There was something so gentle and soothing in its touch, that she stood still for a moment, and let it play with her hair.

"Dear Nina; sweet sister," her thoughts continued. "How I have learned to love you, since you came to us, like a shy, sweet, woodland flower, that you were! How you have lifted my thoughts and desires from self and indolence into a higher, purer atmosphere. I am better for having known you."

A mocking-bird rested his wing on a branch of the China tree near the window where Florence stood, and eyed her with curious inquisitiveness for a moment; then,

tipping his head on one side, sent forth a flood of melody from his clear, sweet throat, which thrilled her lonely heart, as song of bird had never done before.

“Oh, Father, who hast made the world so rich in beauty and fragrance, and song, help me to become more worthy of thy bountiful gifts,” she whispered, looking past the ‘Southern nightingale,’ in his coat of sober gray, to where the sky’s blue curtain hung, like protecting angel pinions over all the earth.

There was a stir in the yard outside; the sound of heavy foot-falls in the hall, and a moment later, the dark face of Aunt Dinah was thrust in at the door.

“Bress de Lawd, Miss Florrie. I’s back ag’in, I is. Seem like when ‘flections ‘gin ter come, dey don’t hold back fo’ nobody nor nuffin.’ But dar’s a break in de cloud now, honey, an’ I reckon as how dar’ll be a spell o’ pleasant weather.”

“I am so glad to see you back again,” said Florence, falteringly.

“I reckon yo’ is, chile,” replied Aunt Dinah, complacently, wiping the dust from her shoes with her handkerchief. “Dat good-fo’-noffin fool nigger, Lize, starve yo’ to deff, I reckon. Now yo’ jes’ fix you mouf for some-thin’ good fo’ dinner—sweet potatoes b’iled in ‘lasses, an’ waffles, an’—well, you’ll tink Aunt Dinah’s got home fo’ sure when yo’ gwine ter eat.”

She waddled out of the parlor in self-important haste, and Florence resumed her dusting.

"I do hope, as Aunt Dinah says, there's to be a spell of pleasant weather, now that we have passed through a siege of affliction," she soliloquized, moving the duster more briskly, as her spirits became more buoyant with the comforting assurance of Aunt Dinah's return, and the lifting of unaccustomed cares from her own shoulders.

Her despondency seemed to have vanished as if by magic; and she echoed the songster's melody with notes as joyous as his own.

"Aunt Mary is so much better, that she will soon be able to come down to the parlors; and Nina writes that grandpapa will be able to come home in a few days. What a glad reunion it will be! I should like to see the kind gentleman Nina writes so much about. I wish he would come with them. The most wonderful piece of news of all is grandpapa's conversion. Nina writes that he believes in God. It does not seem possible to me; and yet, when I remember 'that all things are possible with God,' I ought not to be surprised at this.

"How much dear grandpapa must love Nina, for being so brave in going to him, and caring for him, when he needed her loving devotion so much; and how he must despise my cowardice in remaining in safety! I wish, oh!

how I do wish that God would let me do something for him, just to prove that I love him too.

She did not seem to recognize the value of those kindly, unselfish acts of hers, when, in another way, she had been doing quite as much for grandpapa as Nina. She felt that she wanted to be of personal assistance to him.

"Nina saved his life," her thoughts continued; "and if I might only do something to make that life brighter and happier, I should be satisfied. I can best do this by loving devotion to him, by trying to become more like Nina; and, with God's help, I *will* try to cultivate those qualities of heart and mind which will endear me to him."

She had reached the fire-place in the library, in her process of dusting, by this time, and resumed her task with renewed energy.

The front of the fire-place was made of tiles nicely fitted together; each one painted in some pretty design, the work of Florence's father in his boyhood. These were the Spanish Missions, sketches of scenery along the San Antonio River, Texas birds and blossoms—all painted by his brush in the long ago.

Many a time in the past, when Florence's heart had longed for a parent's affection, she had spent long hours gazing at those amateur paintings, and wondering what her father would have been like if he had lived. She was not thinking of him or of the pictures now; her



whole mind was absorbed in the joyful anticipation of the family reunion which would take place, as soon as Grandpapa Chester was able to return home.

Back and forth, up and down, right and left, she sent the duster, with rapid movements. Whisking it about, it struck against one of the tiles, which had become loosened, and dropping from its place, it fell to the floor.

She stooped to pick it up.

"Ah!" she said, "this must be fixed, or it will get broken by falling on the hard marble hearth."

Fitting it in the place from which it had fallen, she tried to push it back even with the rest; but it refused to obey her. Taking it out again she looked into the opening to discover why the tile would not fit, and she saw what resembled a folded piece of paper pressed against the background, and flattened as if the tile had been pushed firmly against it.

"What can it be?" thought Florence, drawing it out of its hiding place, "and who could have put it there?"

The room was not very light, and she replaced the tile, intending to take the paper to the window for examination.

"It must have been put there to hold the tile more securely in its place," mused Florence. "It fits so loosely without the paper that I shall have to put it back again."

She was about to do this, when something peculiar in

the appearance of the paper caused her to examine it more closely.

She turned toward the window, unfolded the paper, and then the paintings on the walls seemed to join hands and dance about in a most fantastic manner. Grand-mamma Chester's picture, painted in her girlhood, laughed at her, nodded its head merrily, and became strangely mixed up with the yellow-haired boys on either side of it. A queer, suffocating sensation clutched at Florence's throat, and her heart beat with loud, heavy throbs, like a blacksmith's hammer on his iron anvil.

She sank into a chair, dizzy and faint. The mocking-bird flew from the China tree to the window-sill, and renewed his song; the sunshine lay in a long, bright line across the carpet; the breeze fluttered the curtains, and lifted her yellow hair from her heated brow; a faint odor of roses came to her, mingled with the sweet fragrance of China-blooms, which hung in abundance from the tree outside. All these things had been the same before; but, oh, how changed they all seemed now! The bird's song was clearer, with a glad, triumphant shout in its swelling notes. The sun seemed warmer and brighter; the perfume still sweeter; and Florence's heart was nearly bursting with joyous thanksgiving.

"It is grandpapa's lost money; and God has let *me* find it for him," she said, in a hushed voice.

In that moment she did not question why the money had been hidden back of the tile, or how it came to be there; but, remembering that she had asked God to let her contribute to the happiness of the life which Nina's care had saved, she accepted this as a direct answer to that prayer.

"I have found it, found it all," she said, counting it over. "Not a dollar of it is missing; but what shall I do with it until grandpapa comes?"

Mrs. Randall sat by the low, open window in her room. She had been listening to the same happy notes from the little songster in the China-tree by the library window, which had attracted Florence's attention. An open Bible lay in her lap. She had been reading some of those blessed passages of Scripture which have been such a source of comfort and consolation to tired hearts through all the years since Christ was on earth. She was as a child in her new-found hope, reaching up through the ruin and desolation of her happy dreams—through the darkness and the gloom which lay heavy on her heart; she had touched God's hand in that darkness, and a thrill of his infinite love had come to her like a ray of light through the shadows which surrounded her.

She was too weak for deep research; too worn with tears and heartaches for conflicting doubts and questionings. It was enough for her just to believe. As a little

babe is first fed upon milk before it can retain stronger food, so she now rested in her belief, and her glad hope in a power strong to save.

The shadows still lay, dark and brooding, upon her heart. She did not know how God would lift them. She had no past experience of divine things, answered prayers, or fulfilled promises, by which to judge the future; she only waited, wondering how the tangled web of her life would be made straight, but trusting in God, with the simple faith of a child.

"How beautifully the bird sings!" she mused. "It seems like a voice from heaven, speaking peace to my troubled heart."

She heard Florence's step on the stair and in the hall. She had learned to recognize that light foot-fall, and to love its very echoes.

"She is all my sweet little Blossom might have been, had she lived," she thought, as she turned to greet Florence.

Florence came to her side quickly, impetuously, more like Nina than her quiet self, and kneeling at Aunt Mary's feet, cried out:

"I have found it, Aunt Mary, I—oh, is not God good to let *me* find it?"

"Found what, child? I do not understand."

"This—see!" And Florence placed the package of bills in Mrs. Randall's hands.

"What is it, Florence?"

"The fifteen thousand dollars that grandpapa thought had been stolen from him."

Aunt Mary's face grew white—so white that Florence thought she was going to faint; but she recovered at once.

"Are you sure?" she asked, tremulously. "Oh, Florrie, this means so much to me. Where did you find it?"

Then Florence explained.

"How do you suppose it came there?" asked Aunt Mary.

"I cannot imagine," said Florence, "unless the robber became conscience smitten and returned it."

"That cannot be the way," replied Aunt Mary. "If he had returned it, he would scarcely have hidden it in a place where it could not be found except by accident. Besides, to have hidden it there he must first have gained access to the house; and how could a stranger know of the loosened tile, which even you knew nothing of until to-day? There is a mystery about it which may be explained when Andrew returns, and it may never be explained. Oh, Florence, the finding of this money has lifted the heaviest shadow from my heart."

"And mine too," said Florence, laughing almost hys-

terically. "There is nothing more to ask for now. Our blessings come just as our afflictions did—all at once."

And as if to confirm her statement, little, dark Gipsy appeared at the door with a telegram from Colonel Chester, or rather from Dr. Gordon, stating that if Colonel Chester continued to improve through the day, he would start for home in the evening, and desiring Jake to meet him at the morning train with the carriage and pillows.

Such a busy day as followed. Florence forgot her weariness.

"There will be but one night to have the responsibility of all that money on my mind," she thought; "and no one, except Aunt Mary and myself, know that we have found it. I think there will be no danger of losing it again."

"You must wait until your grandfather is well rested from his journey, before you speak of the money, dear," said Mrs. Randall, with cautious solicitude, seeing that Florence could think of nothing else but the recovered treasure, and the pleasure it would afford her to restore it to grandpapa's own hands.

"I will guard my tongue well, Aunt Mary," she replied; "but I am sure that my heart will shout it to him, and my eyes will telegraph it to him, every time I look at his dear face."

There was a jubilee in the kitchen, as well as in the parlor, when the "good news" was made known, that Colonel Chester and Miss Nina would return home in the morning.

"Yo' Lize, yo' jis' get out ob here. Yo' nebber was made fo' to ointment a kitchen, no how," cried Aunt Dinah, consequentially, the moment she had been informed of Colonel Chester's return. "Yo' 'longs in de cotton-fiel'. Ef yo' wants ter help, yo' ken scrub de galleries. As fo' de cookin', do you s'pos'n dat my ole massa could eat a moufful ob vittals what Aunt Dinah hadn't cooked? I jes' got home in de nick ob time, I did."

Lize, in her turn, ordered Gipsy about; and Gipsy spent a good share of her time in practicing handsprings down the smooth garden walk.

Florence was very tired, and very happy when, in the evening, she drew an ottoman close to Aunt Mary's chair, that she might sit there, and "talk it all over with her."

When the first pink flush of the new day was making rosy the eastern sky, Florence awoke, and at once sprang out of bed. She had no memory of rising at so early an hour in all her life before. Her very blood seemed to tingle and thrill with the glad anticipations of what this "new day" was to bring her.

After making a careful toilet, she ran down to assist

Aunt Mary at hers, and to see if there were not some "finishing touches" required in the parlors. Seeing that everything was in perfect order, she called Gipsy, and went out to gather flowers, with which to decorate the tables and mantles.

It was near the last of March, and the roses were blooming in rare abundance. There would be no lack of flowers for her floral decorations; and in a short time she had completed the task to her entire satisfaction.

She had just placed a mammoth bouquet of Mareschal Neil roses on the long, white dining-table, when Jake came to inform her: "Dat de kerrage am a-waitin';" and she ran up to her room for her hat and gloves.

On reaching the carriage, she found Aunt Dinah filling it with snowy mountains of pillows.

"There will not be room for grandpapa, if you put so many pillows in," she remonstrated, taking out several of them, and keeping only two.

As they turned on to Avenue D, they heard the bell of the in-coming train; and Jake, "touching up" the horses, ran a race with it, arriving at the station a moment in advance of it.

Another moment (at least, it seemed no longer), and Florence had kissed Nina and grandpapa, and Jake had stowed them all away in the carriage; and, mounting his seat in front, was driving toward home again.

"You look so thin, grandpapa," said Florence, giving his hand a fond little squeeze between her own. "Are you very tired?"

"Not very, dear. I am much stronger than I thought. The very breath of home seems to strengthen me."

They had prepared a couch for him in the pleasant back parlor, and Jake's strong arms steadied his master's faltering footsteps.

Aunt Dinah brought his breakfast to him, and tossed her head as "proud as any queen" to see him eat with such a relish.

"It's mighty fortunate fo' Massa Chestah dat I 'ribe at home in time fo' to suspend de cookin' ob his vittuals," she remarked, with all the self-importance the case demanded, on taking the empty server back to the kitchen.

During that first morning at home, Florence and Nina had so much to talk over with each other, and so much to say to Grandpapa Chester and Aunt Mary, while little Prince was admired so extravagantly, that his naturally fine disposition was in great danger of becoming spoiled by over-indulgence. And all the time, the two girls were each guarding a secret from the other, and from the rest, though Aunt Mary shared Florence's with her.

The very first moment that Nina had an opportunity of speaking with Aunt Mary in private, she began:

"Aunt Mary, I wish—oh, I do wish you could see Dr.

Gordon. He is a grand, good man, and I am sure you could not help loving him."

Mrs. Randall smiled, and replied :

"I shall always be grateful to him for his kindness to brother Andrew, and his loving care for my little girl, when alone among strangers in a strange land."

"But devotion like his calls for something more than gratitude," exclaimed Nina, impressively, her voice trembling in her anxiety to serve her friend.

Mrs. Randall looked up suddenly, with a grave suspicion in her eyes.

"Nina, is he a young man?" she asked, quickly—a dread foreboding entering her heart. Girls at sixteen had loved and married before. Oh! could it be that Nina's interest in this strange doctor was of a serious nature?

"He is not old," replied Nina, the sweet rose-flush of enthusiastic girlhood coming and going on her face; "and he is very handsome, Aunt Mary, with grave, sad eyes. He has had such an unhappy past. Oh! if I could only make his future bright!"

"Child, I fear that he has been a dangerous companion for you," cried Aunt Mary, in alarm.

"Oh, no, Aunt Mary," replied Nina, innocently. "He has been a great help to me in many ways. Only think of the nights he watched beside grandpapa, and never

once allowed me to lose my usual rest! He saw that I took long walks out in the open air every day; and was as careful and thoughtful of my health as if I had been his daughter."

Mrs. Randall sighed.

"I fear you have learned to care for him, much more than you should," she said, in a troubled voice.

"No, indeed, Aunt Mary; one could hardly do that. I am quite sure you would love him as well as grandpapa and I do, if you could see him now. He is so changed—that is—I——"

Nina paused in confusion. She had nearly forgotten that Aunt Mary did not know who Dr. Gordon was.

Mrs. Randall did not appear as impressed with Dr. Gordon's kindness as Nina desired, and she added, with a shade of disappointment in her tones:

"You cannot deny that it was very kind in him to stay and help us nurse grandpapa."

"He may have had a motive in view," said Aunt Mary. "It may be he hoped to gain something by it."

"Oh, why will you doubt him so?" said Nina. "He told me he had no hopes for the future. He said that that there was something—he did not say what it was—which stood between him and happiness. I think you are unjust, Aunt Mary, to suspect him of having a motive."

"Nina," called Florence from below. "Where are you, Nina?"

"I am coming," answered Nina. She hesitated a moment, looked at Aunt Mary, wistfully, then kissed her, and went to Florence.

"She is such a child," mused Mrs. Randall, sadly, when she was alone. "Why did I let her go alone? As soon as Andrew is a little stronger I will tell him my fears. It may be that they are groundless, and I will try to hope they are; but why is she so enthusiastic in his praises, if she has not learned the sweetest and the saddest lesson of life?"

Florence stood at the foot of the stairs waiting for her cousin.

"Nina," she said, the moment that Nina had reached her, "I have such an important secret to tell you. I cannot wait until after grandpapa's nap is finished. I am to tell him about it then; but Aunt Mary said that I might tell you now, and we could enjoy planning together the surprise for grandpapa."

"I did not know that you had a secret too," said Nina, as they walked away to the live-oak tree together.

"Have you one, Nina?" questioned Florence.

"Yes; mine affects Aunt Mary, most. Whom will your secret affect?"

"All of us; but grandpapa, most," replied Florence.

“What is the best thing that could happen just now, Nina?”

“It seems to me that the best thing that could happen, would be to have Uncle Joe Randall return, a reformed, Christian man—whom we would all be proud of, and especially Aunt Mary and Dyke. Do not you think that would be a good ‘happen,’ Florence?”

“Yes; but that is not possible,” replied Florence, a little disappointed that Nina had not guessed her secret at once. “I think it would be a better ‘happen’ to find grandpapa’s lost money.”

“But that is also impossible,” said Nina

“Is it?” said Florence, laughing. “What if I tell you that I did find it for him, back of one of the tiles, in the library fire-place?”

“Did you! Oh, Florrie, did you?”

“Yes,” replied Florence, brightly, “and that is the secret I am to tell grandpapa when he wakes up from his nap.”

CHAPTER XV.

FLORENCE RESTORES THE LOST MONEY.

IT was finished at last—that long, refreshing nap—during which Colonel Chester had slept away the fatigue of his journey; and he awoke feeling stronger, and brighter than since his illness.

Careful steps and hushed voices had sounded in the hall many times while he was asleep; eyes had peered anxiously into the back parlor, watching for the first sign of his awakening; and scarcely had his eyes unclosed when the girls were both beside him.

“I think I will sit up a while now,” he said, his face reflecting the joyous brightness of theirs.

Florence rolled his easy chair to the window. Nina brought an ottoman for his feet, and together they assisted him to the seat prepared for him.

“They had him nicely fixed when Aunt Mary came into the room, and took an easy chair near him. Her face was still pale with her recent illness; but her smile seemed to have gained a new tenderness during the last few weeks.

Florence had been impatiently awaiting this moment

all day ; and now that it had come, with every condition favorable for the disclosure of her secret, she did not know how to begin.

“My home never seemed so dear to me before,” remarked Colonel Chester, gazing out of the window to where the deeply shaded river wound along, flashing its waters through the foliage of the trees. “I think it is the peace and the glory of God resting on it, which makes it so beautiful in my eyes. I had hoped to finish my days here, where my dear wife lived, and where our boys played.”

There was a touch of sadness in his tones.

“And why may you not do so ?” asked Mrs. Randall.

“I may as well tell you now,” he replied, turning his face from the window. “You would have to know it very soon, and part of the difficult task will be over when I have told you. I cannot repine over my misfortune, since God has blessed me so abundantly in my two girls. We will still have each other, dears ; and you can be my treasures in another home, as well as here.”

“Are you going to sell the dear old home, grand-papa ?” asked Florence, forgetting all else, in her anxiety for the only home she had ever known.

“I fear it must be,” he replied, sadly. “I have had a good offer for the place ; and, you know, I must raise considerable money now.”

Florence and Nina exchanged glances—Aunt Mary flashed a smile in Florence's direction, indicating that now was the time to reveal the secret. Florence flushed rosily, coughed once or twice; but did not speak.

"I was disappointed in the sale I had hoped to make when I went West the last time," Colonel Chester said. "It was then that I decided to sell the home."

"And that decision was what brought about your sickness," said Mrs. Randall.

"Partly, I think," he replied. "I love the old home very dearly, and it will grieve me to part with it."

"Grandpapa," began Florence, in a surprised voice, which did not sound like her own. "Do you know that one of the tiles is loose in the library fire-place?"

"Yes, I discovered it on Christmas Day. Just after dinner it fell out, and I fully intended to have it fastened to its place before this; but the circumstance had slipped my mind completely. I shall feel like taking the whole fire-place with me if I must sell the home. Those are the only paintings I have of Ralph's."

"When I was dusting the fire-place yesterday morning, the tile fell out," continued Florence. Her voice had regained something of its natural tones by this time.

"I hope it did not break. I must see that it is properly replaced at once," he said.

"No, it did not break; but when I tried to put it back

it would not fit; and when I looked to see why, I found some paper crowded in the place."

Colonel Chester turned half around in his chair to look at her. Her tones had an under-current of excitement which drew his attention. He thought the paper might be some of his dead son's belongings.

"What were the papers?" he asked.

"Wait a moment, grandpapa, and I will show you.

She rose and went out of the room. They did not speak while she was gone. Mrs. Randall and Nina did not dare to trust their voices, and Colonel Chester had turned his attention to the pretty lawn sloping down to the river. In the few moments of her absence he had quite forgotten the loosened tiles, and the paper she had found behind it. He was thinking sadly of the home he loved, and how he must soon part with it forever.

So deeply absorbed had he become in his reverie, that he did not notice when Florence returned until her hand rested on his shoulder.

"Grandpapa," she said, in a low, sweet voice, "you do believe in God now?"

"Yes, dear, with my whole heart. I think that my faith is stronger because it came to me late in life."

"You do believe that he can and does answer prayer?"

To Nina, who had known both under very different circumstances, the question and answer seemed almost unreal.

"He has heard and answered mine," replied Colonel Chester. "No prayer that he can ever answer in the future, will seem as miraculous as the sending his divine peace to my troubled heart. Why do you ask, dear?"

"Because I asked him to give me something to do for you—something as great as what Nina had done—to let me make the life happy which she had saved."

"And he has, I am sure, since you have conquered yourself," he replied.

"But God knew that my heart meant more than that," she said, "and he answered my prayer in full. See, grandpapa. He let me find your lost money for you."

She put the roll of bills in his hands as she spoke.

"What! Florrie, child. I don't understand," he exclaimed, much as Mrs. Randall had done.

"I found them back of the loosened tile, grandpapa."

With trembling, eager hands he unfolded the bills and glanced them over.

"My home need not be sacrificed now," he said, unsteadily. Then turning to Mrs. Randall, he added, emphatically:

"He was not guilty, Mary. Forgive me for my unjust suspicion."

"I do, brother, as freely as I hope you will forgive him for other wrongs."

"I have no right to withhold my forgiveness to my

fellow mortal since God has forgiven so much in my own life," he said.

"But, grandpapa, how do you think the money came to be in such a place?" Nina asked.

"I think," replied Colonel Chester, thoughtfully, "that I must have put it there myself."

"You, grandpapa?" asked both the girls, in a breath, while Mrs. Randall regarded him in amazement.

"I remember seeing the loosened tile that day, and thinking what an excellent hiding place it would be for valuable papers. Then the subject passed completely from my mind, and has not occurred to me since."

"I should think you would have known if you had put it there," remarked Florence.

"You know I went to sleep while guarding the money," continued Colonel Chester, without heeding her interruption, "and even in my sleep I must have had the responsibility of its safety on my mind; and it must be that I took the money to the library and hid it back of the loosened tile. I have done things in my sleep before, and I can find no better explanation for it than this."

"It is probably the correct explanation," said Mrs. Randall.

"What if we had never found it, and you had sold the home with the money in it?" exclaimed Florence. "Then

we should always have thought that the man Nina saw by the live oak tree was a robber."

"I have always been sorry for that man," added Nina, "even when I thought he had taken the money. There was such a hopeless look in his face, I cannot forget it."

Mrs. Randall groaned aloud.

"What is it, Aunt Mary? Are you ill?" asked Florence.

"Only a pain," she replied, with her hand pressed over her heart.

"What can I do for you?" asked Nina.

"Nothing, dear; it is better now. It is nothing new. I have had it often before."

Presently the girls went out to gather some fresh roses for the supper-table; and when the brother and sister were alone again, Colonel Chester said:

"Mary, if you desire to send for your husband, do so. I will do all in my power to assist him."

"Alas!" she sighed, "I have no idea where he is now. I have not heard one word from him since the night when I so cruelly refused his request."

After a while, their conversation drifted into other channels. Colonel Chester spoke of his granddaughters proudly, planning a bright future for them, and for himself in their society.

"They seem like children to you, and it is difficult to

imagine them as anything else; but Nina will be sixteen in a few days, and Florence is nearly a year older."

"Yes," he said, with a fond glance down the shaded path, where the girls were walking slowly, arm in arm, the sunlight flashing between the branches of the trees, and gleaming on their bright, yellow heads. "Yes, someone will take them from me one of these days; but I hope it will be many years before I lose them."

"And yet it may be nearer than you think," she replied. "Andrew, what kind of a man is Dr. Gordon?"

"Dr. Gordon," he repeated, "is a good man—one whom I could trust. I think he has been a hard drinker—in fact, he acknowledged as much to me; but he has reformed in the right way. He relies upon God to keep him firm in his purpose of right."

"In some unguarded moment, he may forget God, and fall again. Oh, Andrew! it is such a hopeless task for a drunkard to reform."

"I should be very sorry to learn that Dr. Gordon had fallen into evil ways again," mused Colonel Chester. "I have great faith in that man, and an unaccountable affection for him."

"That is scarcely to be wondered at, under the circumstances; but I fear for Nina. Some things she has said, lead one to suspect that she cares a great deal for him."

"And so she does. We both do," he replied.

“Andrew, do you think it possible for Nina to give him a stronger affection than she has given you? In other words, to give him her heart’s best love?”

“Pshaw, Mary! what nonsense,” he replied, a trifle irritably. “He is old enough to be the child’s father.”

“That may be,” she responded; “but I fear she thinks too much of him. Her praises of him are extravagant.”

“Depend upon it, Mary, it is only her appreciation of his true worth which calls them forth. She is but a child in thought and heart as yet. I hope I may keep her so these many years.”

A strange thing happened in the Chester home that evening, a most unusual occurrence—in fact, it had never taken place there before.

“I feel weary, and shall be obliged to retire early,” said Colonel Chester, when tea was over, and they were all with him in the back parlor.

“I have been thinking much of my past life to-day,” he resumed. “I have, at most, but a few years more to spend upon earth. I cannot redeem my past from the blight of unbelief which is upon it; but I may make a worthier record for my future, and this I shall set about doing at once. I have expressed myself fully on religious subjects at all times. I have talked my unbelief in my home, and among my friends. I was never ashamed to argue against those things; and now that my eyes are

opened, shall I not work as zealously for the cause as I did against it?

"Nina, dear," he continued, turning to her, "you may summon the servants to 'family worship.'"

Nina hastened to do his bidding with a happy heart.

"Bress de Lawd!" ejaculated Aunt Dinah, when Nina informed her of Colonel Chester's request. "De 'kingdom come' am mighty nigh dis mansion ter-night. Who'd a spect dese ole eyes would hab seen de glory ob dis day?"

Jake, Lize, and Gipsy filed into the room in a half-frightened manner; but Aunt Dinah marched triumphantly in, and took her place, as though the custom of "family worship" was as old as the Chester homestead.

Opening the Bible, Nina's own little brown book, Colonel Chester turned to the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah, and handing it to her, requested her to read aloud.

"The print is too small for my eyes," he said. "The first purchase I make, will be a large family Bible."

Once before Nina had read that chapter to Grandpapa Chester, in fear and trembling. She did not realize how important its influence would be; she could scarcely comprehend it as yet. She only knew that God had used her voice to send those words of conviction home to other hearts, and that while she was lamenting over her failure to do acceptable work for him, the good seed had taken root, and was growing.

After the reading, Colonel Chester offered up a short, heartfelt prayer of thanksgiving and praise to God that he had not gone down to his grave without first tasting of the richness of infinite mercy and redeeming love.

It was one of those beautiful, moonlit evenings, with which the far Southern climate is so richly endowed; and Mrs. Randall, together with Florence and Nina, seated themselves on the south-side gallery after Colonel Chester had retired.

The silvery moonlight cast a radiant halo over all the earth, bathing the flowers and shrubs, grass and trees, in a flood of dazzling splendor, and flashing up from the river, as it flowed along between banks of tropical verdure.

They sat in silence for some time, each busy with thoughts that might not be shared with others. There are times in our lives when we stand alone with God. It may be on the crowded street, or in the solitude of our own room; it may be in the midst of the family circle, or out under the clear dome of heaven, that God's Spirit comes close to ours, and we feel that his presence is near us, and that we may commune with him unfettered by doubt or distance. Such a time seemed to have come to them. The new influence working in their hearts and home; the new experience of family worship may have had much to do with it. It may be that the Divine Spirit which God has promised shall be in the midst of two or

three gathered together in his name, still lingered about them when the prayer was finished. At any rate, they were thinking of the new life, and comparing it with the old, thinking that home had now become a sacred place, with the glory of God's presence resting on it.

"Aunt Mary," said Nina, at length, with a wavering voice, as if half fearful the subject she was about to present might be an unpleasant one, "if Uncle Joseph were with us to-night, we should be perfectly happy."

"Yes, dear," she replied, and there was no displeasure in her tones.

This gave Nina courage to continue the subject.

"If he might return to us a reformed Christian man, I think our cup of happiness would be full. Since God has done so much for us in other respects, I think he will grant us this, if we ask him."

"I do, Nina, every day, almost every hour of my life, since I have learned to trust in him," said Mrs. Randall, sadly. "It seems to me that we are never satisfied with the blessings he bestows upon us; but are all the time besieging him for more."

"Elder Williams used to say that God likes us to come to him in this way. You know, Aunt Mary, it does not impoverish him to enrich us, and he wants us to bring and lay at his feet the burdens which can only be lifted by his power."

"I sometimes fear I shall weary him with my petitions," mused Mrs. Randall, in low tones, "but I will never cease asking until my prayer is answered."

"I wonder what grandpapa will do with those books which he used to read in order to prove the fallacy of the Christian religion?" said Florence, from the midst of her own meditations.

"He informed me to-day that he should destroy them," replied Mrs. Randall. "He does not care to have them in his library; and he said that he would not care to present them to his worst enemy, lest his mind be led astray by reading them."

"I am glad that he will destroy them," said Nina. "I am sure he can fill their place with better books."

In a few moments, Nina arose, and bade her aunt and cousin "good-night."

"You are retiring early," remarked Florence.

"I have a letter to write before I go to bed," was Nina's reply.

"Aunt Mary," she said, standing in the door, and looking back, "grandpapa promised me, some time ago, that I might have Papa and Mamma Bruce, and the boys, come to spend my birthday with me. I am going to write and invite them; and I think I shall ask Dr. Gordon to come too."

"You had better consult your grandfather about that,"

said Aunt Mary, with disapproval in her voice, while Florence exclaimed :

“Do, Nina. I am anxious to meet this paragon of a man, whom you and grandfather admire so much.”

“I do not need to consult grandpapa, Aunt Mary, for I know that he will be pleased to have Dr. Gordon visit us. He was very anxious to have him come when we did ; but he could not come then.”

As Nina ascended the stairs, her thoughts went back to a time, a year before, when she had entered Grandpapa Chester's home for the first time. Perhaps it was the invitation she was about to send to Papa and Mamma Bruce, which caused her to remember it at that time. Then she was a poor girl, and had come to sell her hair to Florence. She recalled her sensations when Aunt Dinah ushered her into Florence's pretty blue and drab room, with its fleecy curtains and snowy counterpanes, and left her alone in its dainty loveliness. She remembered how she had envied the young girl who could call such a pretty room her own. It all came back to her, as she passed through the now familiar hall to her own room, joining Florence's, and exactly like hers, only that the carpets and furniture in her own were newer, having been purchased especially for her, less than a year before.

“They must stay three days, at the very least,” mused Nina, drawing her willow-rocker to her writing-desk.

“Mamma will want to see the city. She has always been too busy for a long stay. Yes, they must stay three days, and as much longer as they can.”

After finishing her letter home, she wrote to Dr. Gordon, at El Paso :

I was not at all successful in interesting Aunt Mary in Dr. Gordon. I actually think she is jealous because I like you so well. Of course she has no idea who Dr. Gordon really is. To-night I spoke of Uncle Joseph, and she seemed quite willing to talk on that subject. She thinks she has been cruel to you in the past, though I do not understand how ; and she said to-night, that she prayed almost hourly for your conversion, and return to her. God has already answered the first ; and now, if you will, the second shall come true also. Dear Uncle Joseph, it would make us all so happy if you would come, so as to be here the 3d of April—that is my birthday ; and I do wish you would bring yourself for a birthday present. I am sure that mysterious “something” need not prevent your coming, since Aunt Mary, and all of us, desire it so much. If you come, drop me a line, and I will prepare the family to welcome Dr. Gordon, and will leave the rest for a surprise when you get here.

With loving remembrance,

NINA CHESTER.

P. S. I forgot to tell you, and I suppose it would keep until you come, but for fear that dreadful “something” will keep you away, I will tell you now, that we have found the money that grandpapa lost on Christmas night. Florence found it back of a tile in the library fire-place, where grandpapa had put it in his sleep. Grandpapa will not have to sell the dear old home now, and we are very happy.

CHAPTER XVI.

NINA'S BIRTHDAY PRESENT.

THREE days later Dr. Gordon read Nina's letter with a misty tenderness in his eyes; but a firm resolve in his heart that Nina's request, and his dear wife's prayer, must not be answered by him. He could not go to her, much as she might desire it, or his own inclination urge him to do so, while that dark shadow rested on his name.

He had finished Nina's letter, and was about to lay it aside (it had brought him joy and pain. Joy in the knowledge that his wife had forgiven him, pain in the thought that their separation might be forever) when he discovered that Nina had added a postscript on the back of the letter.

Taking it up again, he read it, and his decision underwent a sudden change.

"The money is found," he cried, joyously. "Mary's prayer shall be answered, and Nina shall have her wish."

"A letter for you, Nina," said Colonel Chester, the day before her birthday, while they were yet seated at the

breakfast table—Jake having brought the mail direct from the “carrier” to the table.

Nina took it eagerly, and seeing that the post-mark was El Paso, tore it open with trembling haste.

“Oh, grandpapa, Aunt Mary, Florence, listen,” she cried, joyously:

MY DEAR NINA.—You shall have the birthday present you desire. I will reach San Antonio on the morning of the third, if nothing occurs to prevent.

Affectionately yours,

DR. GORDON.

Mrs. Randall’s face grew very grave while Nina was reading, and even Colonel Chester was compelled to acknowledge that the letter employed more endearing terms than he could desire.

“Ahem! Let me see the letter, Nina,” he said, reaching for it. “What does he mean by a birthday present? You surely have not asked him to bring you one.”

“Yes, I have. A splendid present; and he is going to do it,” said Nina, laughing.

“I did not think you could do such a thing, Nina,” remarked Mrs. Randall, in deep displeasure, while the old stormy look Nina had once feared so greatly, settled down over Colonel Chester’s face.

“Oh, dear,” cried Nina, “I am afraid I shall have to explain. Dear Aunt Mary, don’t look so horrified. I

have not done anything so very dreadful. Do try to trust me until to-morrow. I promise you solemnly" (the roguish dimples in her cheeks and the laughter in her eyes contradicted her words) "never to speak to him again after to-morrow, if you think best."

"You seem confident that your Dr. Gordon will bewitch us all as he has you," said Florence, good-naturedly.

"I am not sure," said Nina; "but I hope so. Grand-papa"—with grave importance—"I would like to speak a few words with you in private. I find that I shall be obliged to explain matters to you a little, or you will never allow me to receive Dr. Gordon's present, and it is such a fine, large one, I should be very sorry to refuse it."

"Come into the library with me, Nina," he said, rising and leading the way.

"Can it be that it is a new piano?" asked Florence, following them with curious eyes.

"I hope that he will refuse to allow her to accept anything from that man," said Mrs. Randall, in anxious tones. "I begin to dislike him very much."

A moment later and Nina, radiant with happiness, followed by Colonel Chester, whose face seemed like a reflection of her own, came out of the library.

"He has consented," she cried, bobbing her bright head up and down, "and it only took one kiss to win him over."

"What is the present, grandpapa? Is it a piano?" asked Florence.

"I am pledged to secrecy," he replied; "but I should hardly call it by that name."

Late in the day the Bruce family arrived, and the girls were as busy as bees in entertaining their guests.

Mrs. Bruce and Mrs. Randall formed at once a mutual attachment, and they found it much pleasanter sitting in the large cool parlors conversing on subjects suitable to their age and inclinations, than in following the young people's restless footsteps. Mr. Bruce and Colonel Chester were interested in cotton culture, and "the children," as these older people persisted in calling them, wandered away by themselves.

Nina, who had known no preference for her brothers in her childhood days, discovered that Neil's more serious nature had many attractive qualities, while Florence, more sedate than her sprightly cousin, found much to admire in Ned's genial laughter and merry jocularities.

Unconsciously they paired off in this manner; and during the next three happy days, Neil was always at Nina's side, while Ned attended the more stately Florence.

How Nina managed to keep her precious secret concerning Dr. Gordon from her companions, the remainder of that day, was a surprise to herself, and a wonder to

them all afterward. But keep it she did; and when the carriage, in which Colonel Chester had gone to the train to meet Dr. Gordon, drove up to the side entrance, she did a very undignified thing; and instead of remaining in the parlor with the rest, as she should have done, she ran out to meet him, giving him a girl's glad kiss in the hall.

She then hurried him into the library with the indefinite promise that she would "send her to him soon," and closed the door, leaving him alone among the books and the family portraits, which smiled a silent welcome.

Mrs. Randall, coming down the broad stairs, was intercepted on her way by Nina, rosy with happiness.

"He has come, Aunt Mary, and I have shut him up in the library, that I might introduce him to you first."

"Nina!" cried Mrs. Randall, aghast. "Whatever prompted you to do such an unusual and unlady-like thing? I beg you to control yourself, and keep your excessive happiness out of your eyes. Do not, I pray, let Dr. Gordon suspect your delight at his visit."

"Oh! I told him just how happy I am!" exclaimed Nina, innocently, drawing Mrs. Randall toward the library-door. "He knows all about it. I could not hide it from him if I tried. And oh, Aunt Mary! you will not be angry when you know that my delight is most on your account."

She flung open the door as she spoke, and stepped back for Mrs. Randall to enter.

"I am going to leave you to introduce yourself, Aunt Mary," she said, huskily; and at once closed the door, leaving Mrs. Randall in the dim library, with a flush at Nina's impolite conduct on her sensitive face.

As soon as Nina had closed the library-door, she flew to the parlor, where Colonel Chester was informing his guests and Florence of Dr. Gordon's identity.

"I have shut them both in the library!" exclaimed Nina, laughing. "And oh, Florrie, you should have seen the horrified expression on Aunt Mary's face, when I told her to introduce herself to Dr. Gordon. She thought I was a rude, impolite girl; but she knows by this time why I am so happy."

Nina flung herself down at Mamma Bruce's feet, and rested her head on the knee at which she had learned her first prayer. Mrs. Bruce's hand passed lovingly over the bright head of the dear daughter who had been such a treasure in that far-off Michigan home.

Presently the parlor door opened, and Mrs. Randall, with the light of sweet contentment shining in her clear eyes, followed by a tall, handsome man, with a grave, kindly face, entered the room.

Colonel Chester met them at the threshold.

"May God bless you, my sister, in your new-found

happiness," he said, tenderly. "And you, my brother, may the peace of God's blessing rest upon your life henceforth. Welcome, thrice welcome, to my home."

He then introduced the stranger to those present, and invited them all into the dining-room, where a bountiful meal was served, prepared by Aunt Dinah, who was never happier than when the house was filled with guests.

"There is but one missing link in the family-circle now," said Colonel Chester, as he gazed down the well-filled table; "and that will be supplied when the eleven o'clock train arrives. I telegraphed for Dyke to come on that train, and have his answer that he will be here."

"I thank you, brother," murmured Mrs. Randall.

"The dear boy! Has he grown much?" asked Mr. Randall.

"He is a young giant," returned Colonel Chester.

"And a young tornado," said Florence, laughing.

"He is a boy, and I always did like boys!" exclaimed Nina, with a mischievous glance at the two brothers who had fought and quarreled over the possession of her from her very babyhood.

"Let us return thanks," said Colonel Chester, bowing his head. And every head was bowed lowly, reverentially, while from every heart thanksgiving went up to him who had blessed this home so abundantly.

When the morning meal was finished, Colonel Chester ordered the carriage, and instructed Jake to drive the young people wherever they chose, until eleven o'clock, at which time they were to go to the train to meet Dyke.

"Make the most of the carriage this morning," he said, as they took their seats. "Mr. and Mrs. Bruce, and Mr. and Mrs. Randall are to visit the Spanish Missions this afternoon. If you young people care to go in so large a company, I will get a carriage from the stables, or you can go by yourselves to-morrow."

"I think we would prefer to wait until to-morrow?" replied Niel, interrogatively, glancing at the girls.

"To be sure we will," confirmed Nina; "and then we can get lost again, if we want to. But what shall we do this afternoon?"

"Suppose we go to the Springs. It will be a nice, quiet time there now, and we can go in the street-cars," suggested Florence.

"I approve of that plan," Niel hastened to say. It is doubtful if he would have objected to any suggestion Florence would have made.

Many interesting sights are to be found in and about the old Spanish city of San Antonio. The streets are narrow and irregular, ending abruptly in the most unexpected places; some of the low-walled, small-windowed adobe houses show walls battered and dented by the

bullets which flew thick and fast during those early, troublous times, when, between the Indians on the one hand, and the Mexicans on the other, the early Texas settlers led a stormy life of constant warfare.

The government-post located at this place, attracts the attention of all visitors. The grounds, on Government Hill, are beautifully laid out; the officer's homes, built of stone, are handsome structures, surrounded by all that money and love for the beautiful can do in ornamentation. They have fine lawns, with fountains and flowers; wide galleries, with climbing roses and ivy; and lovely drives, shaded by long, double rows of that most beautiful of all shade-trees, the China-tree. Cement walks surround a large, open space where the soldiers drill, and where, twice a week, "dress parade" calls forth crowds of people to witness the interesting spectacle.

Ned and Neil were most interested in the horses; and indeed they are well worth seeing, with their large, intelligent eyes, as they turn their heads in their stalls, and regard you inquisitively over their shoulders. The name of each horse, together with his owner's name, is over the stall in which he is kept. The barracks, and the fine grounds within the open court, were next inspected. Our young people gazed up the dizzy height to where the Government Tower arose far above any object in all the surrounding country; but in so doing, they discovered

by the town clock that they would scarcely have time, before eleven o'clock, for the ascent; and decided to come again, when Dyke could accompany them, and they could climb the long stairs together.

They were at the station to meet Dyke when he stepped from the train, and it took all four of them to answer his eager questions concerning the money, Dr. Gordon, his father's return, and all the things which had transpired during his three month's absence from home.

Dyke scarcely recognized his father in the tall, erect form which came to meet him when he had reached the house. The clasp of his strong hand, and the low-spoken "My son," with a deep tenderness in the tones, touched Dyke's heart as it had never been touched before. He had expected to find his father improved in many ways; he remembered him as a miserable "slave to drink," and he thought that by conquering his appetite he had possibly regained something of his lost manhood; but this courtly, dignified gentleman, with just a touch of gravity in his manner, who commanded respect and admiration from all—could he be the father who had brought such misery into their home?

"I did not know that intemperance could degrade a man so much," he thought. "I will never taste of the stuff which has power to bring about such a change to those who are slaves to it. I might be strong enough to

go just so far, and no farther; I might, perhaps, but I doubt it. If such a grand man as my father could fall so low as I have seen him, what could I expect for myself? No, it is a dangerous thing at the best; and I believe there is more real, true manhood in refusing to drink, than in accepting."

After three days of sight-seeing and companionship with Nina, the Bruces returned to their lovely home, "Live Oaks," where the two girls often visited, carrying sunshine and happiness with them, and bringing back to their city home wholesome lessons of life's best wisdom, such as only a loving woman knows how to impart to youthful minds.

Nina and Florence Chester had become as sisters during those weeks of anxiety and trial, when they were each learning to practice self-denial; and in so doing, were becoming familiar with a higher, truer happiness than their hearts had been capable of entertaining before. Unselfish love is the best and truest love—it most nearly resembles the "love divine."

When the excitement of Nina's birthday gathering was over, and the household had renewed its wonted quiet after Dyke's return to school, Ben Hur, the book which had already been the means of assisting in the accomplishment of much good, was brought forth, at Colonel Chester's request, and once more it was read

aloud to a circle of interested listeners. Colonel Chester was deeply impressed with the story, and especially with those parts of it which relate to Christ.

“To think that I should have put such a book in Nina’s hands, with full permission to read and enjoy it, at the time when my heart was full of bitterness because she loved the Bible story!” Thus he thought many times during its perusal. “Ah, truly, ‘God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform.’ Of what avail is our puny human strength and opposition compared with his supreme power? We are as a pebble cast into the sea of time. A few ripples agitate the water’s surface, where we sink from sight in our resistance of the waves; that is all. The ocean is neither greater nor less for all our struggles. God uses us to do his will, and to accomplish his purposes. Blindly, ignorantly, we follow the beck of his mighty hand, without knowing whither he is leading us. Happy are they who, realizing that he is guiding them, can rest in the assurance that all will be well with them, both here and hereafter.”

“Grandpapa,” said Florence, who loved to bring out her grandfather’s strongly expressed reprobation of the authors whom he at one time admired, “what do you think of the wit and wisdom of infidel writers, now?”

“I think they have used their brilliant intellects in a wrong direction, as they will learn when, perhaps, too

late to save themselves from the results of their own misdirected energies. A truly humble, conscientious Christian life is an unanswerable argument for God. Even in my days of doubt, the perfect faith, and the undeniably answered prayers of a few real Christians, whom I have known, weakened the towers of my unbelief."

"Do you think that any human being, in these days of knowledge, is convinced beyond a doubt of the non-existence of God?" asked Dr. Randall.

"I think that many of the books on the subject are written as much to convince their authors, as well as others," replied Colonel Chester. "I know by my own experience, that when I talked the loudest, and searched the longest for convincing arguments, I doubted most. There probably are many of the more ignorant ones, who follow strictly in the pathway of others, and believe what they are told; but those who have weighed the subject intelligently and studiously, with an honest desire to arrive at correct conclusions, especially those who have searched the Scriptures, and compared them with authentic ancient history—these, I venture to say, find many reasons for doubting their own most lucid arguments."

"I have stood by many a death-bed, and I have yet to visit the first one when the dying expressed regrets for having been deceived into putting their trust in God. On the other hand, I have heard wails of lamentation

that the gift of redemption had not been accepted," said Dr. Randall, thoughtfully.

"It is my opinion that no one meets death in the full possession of his faculties, with his unbelief in God unshaken," remarked Colonel Chester. "That time, when many a mask has been lifted, and the true thoughts revealed, has revealed much, even regarding those men who have left behind them the works of their brains and pen, to lead others into paths of infidelity. Their adherents would desire to have this forgotten by the world they wish to influence through these very books, which the death-bed record of their authors contradict."

The ladies had wandered out to the gallery. And Colonel Chester continued:

"We have been a race of infidels for many years. As my memory of the Chester family extends, they were all unbelievers in God. He selected the youngest and fairest blossom of our household to be the means of bringing about our conversion. This could only be done by giving her most impressible years into the keeping of devout Christian people. Therefore our babe was lost on Lake Michigan's stormy shore, and rescued by those good people, so that in after years, she might come again to her own, and awaken in our hearts an interest in divine things."

CHAPTER XVII.

AN EXCURSION FOR THE CHESTER GIRLS.

THE hot summer days were fast approaching, when all the beauty and fragrance of this far Southern land is scorched and burned away beneath the fiery beams of a tropical sun, and when all out-doors is like a heated furnace, in the intensity of those fierce sun-rays. The refreshing breezes blown from the Gulf of Mexico, temper, in some degree, the long, hot summer. But all those who can afford to do so, seek cooler climes; and from about the middle of May to the first of October, San Antonio, in common with many of its Southern sisters, presents a dreary, deserted appearance.

Those who cannot afford to go away for the hot summer months, loll in the shade, expending all their remaining energy in killing mosquitoes, with which the air seems to swarm during the months of June and early July. Often, for days, even weeks, the thermometer stands at ninety-five degrees in the coolest corner of the house; and often reaches from one hundred and seven degrees to one hundred and fourteen degrees in the shade. This excessive heat saps all strength and vitality, and a languid

indolence soon becomes habitual. This is not due to laziness; but to the effects of a climate to which the most ambitious and sprightly will soon succumb.

As if to compensate for the heat and languor of the day, the evenings are supremely delightful. Often the cool "gulf breeze" blows all day; and if one is fortunate enough to secure a room with a south exposure, and has no other employment than to sit and "take the breeze," one can pass the time very pleasantly; for the breeze which fans the heated brow, blows away the swarms of mosquitoes. These breezes, which the favored few may enjoy during the day, are free to all when the sun has gone to shower his "white heat" blessings upon some other part of the world. The evenings are beautiful—indescribably so. After the furor and heat of the day, the calmness and coolness of the evening is most gratefully enjoyed.

Mr. Randall, known to San Antonians as Dr. Randall, desired, at first, to make a home for himself and family in some new place; but Colonel Chester needed the companionship of a gentle, refined woman for his granddaughters, and he persuaded Dr. Randall to take up once more his profession of medicine in the "Alamo" city.

"I acknowledge that there are many physicians here," he said, in answer to Dr. Randall's argument that his profession appeared to be "overworked" in San Antonio,

"but there is always room for more. Our city is crowded each year with Northern invalids, who, escaping from the rigors of the Northern climate, seek the balmy, life-restoring atmosphere, and summer mildness of our own. I think you will do quite as well here as elsewhere. Aside from this, I have a selfish motive in wishing you to remain. I do not see how I can spare sister Mary from my home."

So it was decided that they were to remain, and that Mrs. Randall should still occupy the place of a mother to the two motherless girls.

Colonel Chester had long promised Florence a trip through California; and since Mrs. Randall could not be persuaded to spend any part of the summer away from her husband, the Colonel suggested that now was a favorable time for their trip, and home would be well cared for during their absence. Nina, of course, was to accompany them; and only happy girls like the two I have written about, can appreciate the full enjoyment they experienced in their preparations for that delightful trip to the country which, in their imagination, had taken the place of childhood's "fairy land."

Just before they started on their journey, they made a "flying visit" to Live Oaks, "Because," as Nina said, "we shall be gone for three or four months, at the least; and there is no knowing when we shall all meet again."

Neil, standing beside her, bent his handsome young face a trifle closer to his own, and said, in a low voice:

“Ned and I will start for Chicago before you return; and, as you say, Nina, there is ‘no knowing’ when we shall meet again.”

“What will you do in Chicago?” asked Nina.

“I shall commence the study of medicine, and Ned the study of law,” he replied. “I am quite sure that I have made no mistake in my chosen profession,” he added; “but I think Ned has. I think he will eventually choose a mercantile life; but it will be well enough for him to understand enough of law to keep his own reckless self out of danger. We did not tell you our intentions before, because we were not fully decided.”

“What will papa and mamma do without you?” asked Nina. “How will papa run the farm, or mamma keep house, when you are both away?”

“He will oversee the work, and hired men will have to do it. Somehow, we all lived on, Nix,” (adopting the old pet name of her childhood tenderly), “after you left us. Home has never seemed quite the same to me since; but we lived, and I suppose we shall go on living, no matter what changes take place. Boys grow to be men, you know; and mothers have to let them go out into the world for themselves.”

A peal of merry laughter came echoing up the garden

path, where Ned and Florence were standing under the rose-tree.

"They are all glad, free-hearted children yet," Mr. Bruce said in his wife's ear, as their fond eyes wandered first to the couple at the window, then to those under the rose-tree. "Neil seems older than the rest; and it seems to me that I can see the dawning of an affection stronger and deeper than brother-love in his eyes, when he looks at Nina. Oh, mother! if this might be, our old age would be crowned with the best blessing we could desire or ask for in life."

"If, in the years to come, God sees fit to give our little girl back to us again, I shall feel that my cup of happiness is full indeed," she said, tremulously. "It will be a long time before the children meet again, and during that time, they will associate with others. They will meet as men and women next, and other attachments may be formed in the meantime. We cannot tell."

"It may be for all except Neil. I think *he* will always give the little girl he learned to love in Michigan the first place in his heart," replied Mr. Bruce.

"I shall be very lonely when all my birds have flown from the home nest," said Mrs. Bruce, when she kissed the girls "good-by."

"We will write long letters to you often," replied Nina; that will be almost like having us with you again."

The last evening they spent at home, was a pleasant one indeed. The girls sang several hymns, in which the others united. Colonel Chester attempted to join in the sacred songs he had learned to love so late in life. Afterward each one had some bright experience of answered prayer to relate; and their hearts were drawn together by the silver cords of a love stronger and deeper than they had known before.

"Those who have gone before seem nearer to me, since I can add to my memory of them a hope in a glad reunion. My lost wife trusted in God; and it pains my heart to remember I so often grieved her by my unbelief," said Colonel Chester.

"We have all regrets to look back upon," said Dr. Randall, sadly, glancing, with fondest affection, at his wife, "memories which we would fain forget, except that they help to make us more kind in our present life."

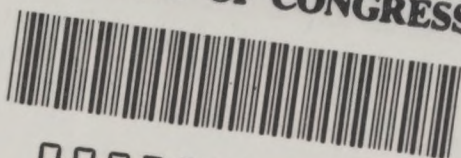
The moonlight was flooding the earth with silvery radiance; the cool "gulf breeze" swayed the trees gently to and fro, casting wavering shadows on the lawn, where the two girls wandered with their arms clasped lovingly about each other. Hearts were filled with thoughts too deep for words.

[THE END.]





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